

SATHYA SAI BABA

AS AVATAR

**“HIS STORY” AND THE
HISTORY OF AN IDEA**

by

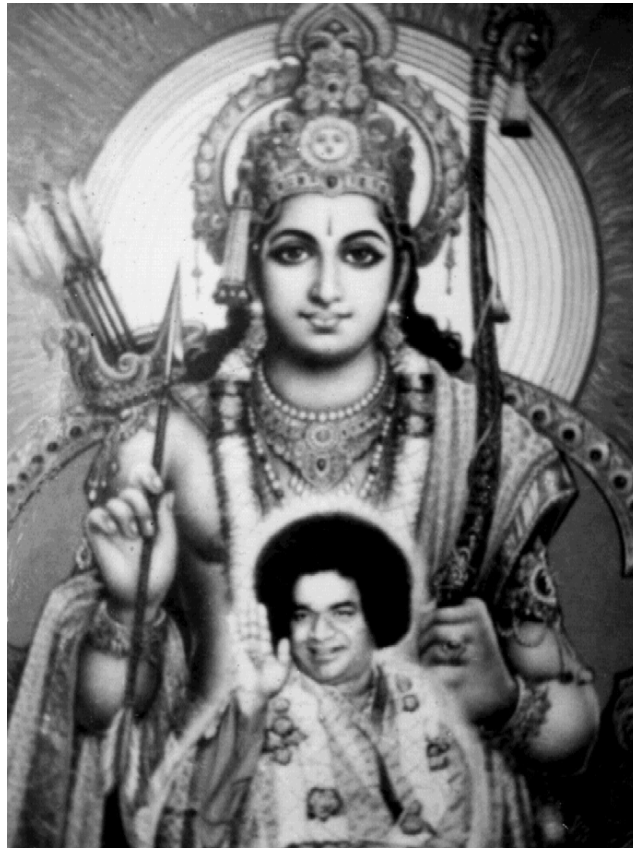
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Sathya Sai Baba as Avatar: a devotional image aligning Sathya Sai Baba with Rāma, a major traditional avatar figure.¹

¹ <http://www.sathyasai.org/pictureinfo/perfectform/perfectbig/303.jpg> [7-3-2007]. NB All internet addresses (underlined) in the electronic (pdf) version of this document are clickable in Acrobat Reader 6.0 and upwards, but some of them are no longer available on the internet—on this, and on the style of internet-referencing that I employ here and hereunder, see pp.11ff. On copyright issues concerning all images used in this study, see p.9 below.

Abstract

I begin this thesis with a brief account of my meetings with popular South Indian *guru* Sathya Sai Baba (1926-) and very brief a discussion of recent fraud and sexual abuse allegations that have been made against him. I note that one of the key factors involved in this, also accountable for his extraordinary popularity, is his divine persona—especially his self-proclaimed identity as “the avatar”—and I review previous academic studies pertaining to this. In contrast to most previous studies of Sathya Sai Baba, which align him primarily with Śaiva traditions and with the “Sai Baba movement”, I note a strong (and long running) affinity in his ideas for Vaiṣṇava traditions (especially the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*), and I add that his background as a member of a traditionally highly regarded bardic caste may have contributed to his divine persona. I further investigate this persona via a history of potentially parallel traditional and modern avatar ideas. I show something of the manner in which many of the avatar concepts and myths to which Sathya Sai Baba refers originated and developed, especially invoking the episteme of “resemblance”, posited by Brian Smith, the idea of “inclusivism”—which I adapt from the work of Paul Hacker and Wilhelm Halbfass—and traditional (Sāṃkhya) processes of “distinction”, “categorization”, and “enumeration”. In addition to these, I much refer to Max Weber’s analysis of “pure types” of authority—traditional, charismatic, and rational—showing that Sathya Sai Baba draws upon all of these in legitimating his claim to be “the avatar”. I also show that his divine persona draws upon a strong affinity that he exhibits for *advaita* (“non-dualism”), especially that of Śaṅkara, and that his personal history of intense devotional and ecstatic/yogic spiritual practices was likely important in the formative stages of this persona. I further suggest that the history of his geographic locale, in which there are strong themes of sacred kingship and ecstatic/advaitic/poetic/devotional sainthood, may have contributed to the production and reception of his persona. On top of this, I note that the influence of a number of modern avatar figures, especially Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Aurobindo, is patent in his avatar teachings, and I compare and contrast him with a number of other significant modern figures. Based upon all of this, I consider the question of whether Sathya Sai Baba ought to be regarded as a “traditionalist”, both *vis-à-vis* modernity (“Neo-Hinduism”, as defined especially by Paul Hacker) and “innovation”. I conclude that, in contrast to most previous scholarly characterizations, he is certainly innovative, but that he ought not to be considered a “Neo-Hindu”—most appearances to the contrary being due to his borrowing or extrapolating ideas in a very traditional manner from typical Neo-Hindu thinkers (especially Vivekananda), *as if these ideas, and those that framed them, were thoroughly traditional*. Finally, I outline a couple of major themes in his avatar teachings: an ambivalent attitude to his role as an exemplar, which I note to accord with earlier and parallel avatar ideas; and strong docetic tendencies, which similarly, in contrast to some scholarly characterizations, find parallels in popular portrayals of other avatar figures.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Abbreviations</i>	6
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	8
<i>Table of Figures</i>	9
<i>Notes on Transliteration, Translation & Referencing</i>	11
1. INTRODUCTION TO AN INCARNATION	17
1.1 Oriental Objectivity	21
1.2 Indecent Descent?	38
1.3 Explaining Embodiment	55
1.4 Incarnation & Innovation	72
2. STUDIES OF SATHYA SAI BABA	84
2.1 Shirdi Sai & Similar “Saints”	86
2.2 Becoming Baba; Bharadvāja.....	97
2.3 Sathya Sai, Sects & Sociology	115
3. ANCIENT ANTECEDENTS	127
3.1 Sacred Sovereigns	133
3.2 Ritual Resemblances	147
3.3 Emanations, “Explanations” & Enumerations	161
3.4 Epic Epiphanies.....	177
3.5 “God” in the Gītā.....	191
4. MEDIEVAL MANIFESTATIONS	210
4.1 Proliferating Purāṇic Parables	213
4.2 Traditional Typologies & “Technical” Terms	225
4.3 Avatars & Advaita	238
4.4 Oneness & Other Faiths	248
4.5 Devotional Descents	264
4.6 South Indian Influences	281

5. MODERN MILIEUX	294
5.1 The Nativity of Neo-Hinduism	300
5.2 Nationalism & Traditionalism	315
5.3 Stars in the East.....	326
5.4 Assorted Avatars	343
6. DISCUSSION OF A DESCENT	360
6.1 Analyses of the Avatars	364
6.2 Keeping up Appearances.....	378
6.3 Conclusions	395
EPILOGUE	405
REFERENCES / BIBLIOGRAPHY	406
Primary Sources.....	406
Secondary Sources	414
Miscellaneous Sources	421
INDEX (Authors, Terms & Traditional Works)	430

Abbreviations

The works that I have abbreviated are some of my primary sources on Sathya Sai Baba and various reference works (plus a few editions of the Bible that I have found occasion to cite). Some of the abbreviations in this list, and the ways in which I have used them, are based on a system developed by (sometime sociologist, former Sathya Sai Baba devotee, and now anti-Sai Baba activist) Robert Priddy in his online index of Sathya Sai Baba's teachings at <http://home.no.net/anir/Sai/NDX.html> [20-3-2002]. When referring to most of my primary sources on Sathya Sai Baba, I have affixed the volume number of multivolume works directly onto the abbreviation as it is listed below. Other numbers refer to chapter, page and date spoken by Sathya Sai Baba, for there are many printed and online editions of these sources, often with different paginations, and many of them do not give 'edition' or even date of publication information—see 'Works of/on Sathya Sai Baba' (pp.406ff. below) for what details are available in this regard and for any indications that I have been able to give as to which versions of these works I have used².

ASN	Vijayakumari	<i>Anyatha Sharanam Nasthi</i>
B	Svensson, C.	<i>Bhagavad Gita or (The Divine Song)</i>
BLES	Mirchandani, C.D.	<i>Baba - The Life Breath of Every Soul</i>
BV	Sathya Sai Baba	<i>Bhagavatha Vahini</i>
C	Hislop, J.	<i>Conversations with Sathya Sai Baba</i>
CDHMR	Dowson, J.	<i>Hindu Mythology and Religion</i>
D	Drucker, A. (ed.)	<i>Discourses on the Bhagavad Gita</i>
DI	Krishnamani, M.N.	<i>Divine Incarnation – a Mystery</i>
DMSSB	Baskin, Diana	<i>Divine Memories of Sathya Sai Baba</i>
ECM	Kasturi, N.	<i>Easwaramma: The Chosen Mother</i>
ERE	Hastings, J. (ed.)	<i>Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics</i>
GC	Levin, H.	<i>Good Chances</i>
GLI	Karangia, R.K.	<i>God Lives in India</i>
GV	Sathya Sai Baba	<i>Githa Vahini</i>
HDH	Sullivan, B.	<i>Historical Dictionary of Hinduism</i>
LG	Kasturi, N.	<i>Loving God</i>

² NB Priddy's index provides some useful cross-references to different editions of various works (especially C, S, and San), but, for the sake of simplicity, I have not endeavoured to do this hereunder.

LIMF	Padmanaban, R.	<i>Love is My Form</i>
LKV	Sathya Sai Baba	<i>Leela Kaivalya Vahini</i>
MBI	Hislop, J.	<i>My Baba and I</i>
MW	Monier-Williams, Sir M.	<i>A Sanskrit-English Dictionary</i> ³
NASB	Lockman Foundation	<i>The New American Standard Bible Update</i>
NIVSB	Barker, Kenneth (ed.)	<i>The NIV Study Bible</i>
PrashV	Sathya Sai Baba	<i>Prashanthi Vahini</i>
PremV	Sathya Sai Baba	<i>Prema Vahini</i>
RRV	Sathya Sai Baba	<i>Ramakatha Rasavahini</i> [two volumes]
S	Sathya Sai Baba	<i>Sathya Sai Speaks</i> (Rev. & Enlarged Edn.)
San	Anand, G.L. (ed.)	<i>Sanathana Sarathi</i>
Sathyam	Kasturi, N.	<i>Sathyam Sivam Sundaram</i> (4 vols.)
SO	Kamaraju, Anil Kumar	<i>Satyopanisad</i>
SBM	Niranjan et al.	<i>Sai Bhajana Mala</i>
SSB	Sathya Sai Baba	<i>Summer Showers in Brindavan</i>
SRBM	Sathya Sai Baba	<i>Summer Roses on the Blue Mountains.</i>
SSS	Sathya Sai Baba	<i>Sathya Sai Speaks</i> (First Edition)
SSSA	Ramamurthy, K.	<i>Sri Sathya Sai, Aanandadayi</i>
SSSVK	Bottu, Pedda	<i>Sri Sathya Sai Vrata Kalpam</i>
SSV	Sathya Sai Baba	<i>Sathya Sai Vahini</i>
SVAND	Saraf, Somnath (ed.)	<i>Sai Vandana</i>
SuV	Sathya Sai Baba	<i>Sutra Vahini</i>
TSI	Aditya, Sudha	<i>The Sai Incarnation</i>
UV	Sathya Sai Baba	<i>Upanishad Vahini</i>
VD	Fanibunda, E.B.	<i>Vision of the Divine</i>
VV	Sathya Sai Baba	<i>Vidya Vahini</i>

³ NB All of my references to this work are to the HTML version (R.B.Mahoney, 2002, http://homepages.comnet.co.nz/~r-mahoney/mw_dict/mw_dict.html [3-6-2003]). This version gives no page numbers, but my references can be found in any version by looking up the relevant Sanskrit terms.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all of my past and present lecturers and fellow students in the Department of Philosophy & Religious Studies at the University of Canterbury for the many years of expert advice and/or friendly support that allowed me to acquire much learning essential to this undertaking. My supervisors, Aditya Malik and Paul Harrison, have especially, of course, contributed greatly to my approach and ideas for this thesis. If I have fallen short of their high standards it is due to my own incapacity rather than any lack on their part. I should also thank my external examiners for the feedback they provided on the version of this thesis that I initially submitted (this is the second version, the thesis having been accepted on condition that certain revisions were made); Rick Weiss in particular contributed many detailed suggestions for me to follow up⁴.

I should here also thank my parents for supporting me over the duration of my studies. A number of other family members and close friends no doubt also deserve my gratitude—they know who they are and in what manner they have contributed to my life over the last few years. I should also note that I could not have undergone the course of study resulting in this thesis without financial support from the New Zealand Government and the University of Canterbury—substantial student fees are levied, but I recognise that my education has, nonetheless, been greatly subsidised. I should further mention the excellent information-technology and library facilities provided to me at low (or no) cost under their auspices.

⁴ NB This said, my examiners required a substantial shortening of my thesis—much material in the category “interesting but inessential” had to be omitted. Anyone who would like a copy of the version that I initially submitted may contact me by email (address given on the final page below).

Table of Figures

I have utilized images and quotations in this study based on my understanding of New Zealand copyright laws (and analogues of this that I have come across in the laws of other countries), which allow for reproduction of any work “for the purposes of criticism or review”. Unless otherwise specified below, the copyright for these images (if there is one) remains with the original copyright holder. Such images should not be reproduced from the present work—they may only be reproduced from the original source, and only under such terms as are specified by the original copyright holder. One image, Fig.16b is available for public use under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike License (CC-BY-SA-2.0).

Fig.1	p.16	Photograph taken by the author, November 2000.
Figs.2a,b,c,d&e	p.16	Photographs taken by the author, November 2000.
Fig.3a	p.17	http://www.askbaba.com [13-6-2002], specified as available for public reproduction conditional upon inclusion of an acknowledgement: “courtesy of http://www.netnews.com ” (cf. http://www.sssbpt.org/images/Location_Puttarparthi.jpg [24-8-2006])
Fig.3b	p.17	Modified from http://www.childrenewaccine.org/html/cs-ap.htm [4-9-2004] (no copyright information given at this source)
Fig.4	p.30	Photograph of the author. Courtesy of Susanna Krishnamurti. All rights reserved.
Fig.5	p.30	http://www.hindu.com/thehindu/features/saibaba/images/2005112300240112.jpg [5-3-2007]
Fig.6	p.55	Photograph taken on the author’s camera, August 2002, all rights reserved.
Fig.7	p.86	http://sss.vn.ua/datta3.jpg [24-8-2006]
Fig.8	p.88	Scanned from Anon. (2000), p.40.
Fig.9	p.88	http://www.radiosai.org/Journals/o1AUG31/Memories/HisForm.htm [1-7-2005]
Fig.10	p.91	http://www.sssbpt.org/images/AtiRudra15/pages/AR15_04.hm [24-8-2006]
Fig.11a	p.96	http://www.sathyasai.org/pictureinfo/perfectform/perfectjpg/o11.jpg [24-8-2006]
Fig.11b	p.96	http://www.saimandirusa.org/sai/shirdi.jpg [24-8-2006]

Fig.11c	p.96	http://www.sathyasai.org/pictureinfo/perfectform/perfectjpg/003.jpg [24-8-2006]
Fig.12a	p.133	http://sss.vn.ua/chariot8.jpg [5-4-2007]
Fig.12b	p.133	Copied from Hillary Rodrigues (2006), p.56
Fig.13	p.137	http://home.no.net/abacusa/Sai_Baba%20Throne2T.jpg [5-4-2007]
Fig.14	p.141	Modified “Free outline map” from http://geography.about.com/library/blank/blxindia.htm [5-4-2007] (no copyright restrictions)
Fig.15	p.141	http://sss.vn.ua/baba12.jpg [23-11-2006]
Fig.16a	p.159	http://www.sathyasai.org/pictureinfo/perfectform/perfectjpg/078.jpg [5-4-2007]
Fig.16b	p.159	http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Sivakempfort.jpg [5-3-2007] (by Deepak Gupta—see http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/de/deed.en for terms of use).
Fig.17	p.177	http://sss.vn.ua/gaya_sai.jpg [22-9-2006]
Fig.18	p.189	http://www.saibabaofindia.com/materializationofjewels.htm [13-6-2007]
Fig.19	p.199	http://www.stephen-knapp.com/images/963Universalform.jpg [20-9-2006]
Fig.20	p.200	Scanned from front cover of M.L.Leela (nd)
Fig.21a	p.207	http://www.stephen-knapp.com/910Parthasarathi.jpg [31-8-2006]
Fig.21b	p.207	http://groups.yahoo.com/group/saidevotees_worldnet/message/1936 [7-3-2007]
Fig.22	p.215	http://www.sainilayamlk.com/html/wp21.htm [4-8-2006]
Fig.23	p.281	Map drawn by the author, January 2008.
Fig.24	p.286	Scanned from Madhao Patil (1999), p.30
Fig.25	p.315	http://shivomindia.tripod.com/medias/pm-vaj.htm [24-8-2006]
Fig.26	p.316	http://www.sainilayamlk.com/html/wp22.htm [4-8-2006]

Notes on Transliteration, Translation & Referencing

The various textual sources for this study (both academic and popular) use a wide variety of methods for transcribing or transliterating Indian words. Thus, for example, the name of the subject of this study is rendered as: ‘Bhagavān Śrī Satya Sāī Bābā’ (transliteration into Romanized Indian characters); ‘Bhagavān Śrī Satya Sāyī Bābā’ (a Sanskritized version of the former); ‘Bhagavān S’ree Satya Sāyi Bābā’ (transliteration within the limits of a simple typewriter keyboard); ‘Bhagawan Shri Satya Sai Baba’ (transliteration into standard Roman characters); ‘Bhagavaan (or Bhagawaan) Shree Sathya Sai (or Saayi) Baaba’ (attempts to render the name phonetically); and ‘(Sri) Sathya Sai Baba’ (the most common transliteration of his name in the literature concerning him, and that which he himself uses when signing his name in English). I will adopt this last usage for my own writing, but, of course, will need to cite several of the other forms described above. And, to further complicate matters, there are a number of variations on Sathya Sai Baba’s name as used by both himself and his devotees in more informal contexts: Sathya, Sai, Baba, Swami, Swamiji, Bhagavan (in translation as “the Lord”⁵), and Raju (his surname)—all in various spellings (as above) and in assorted combinations.

Of the above-described methods of transliteration, the various attempted phonetic renderings (which predominate in my primary sources) may require some further explanation for those accustomed to reading standard academic Romanized transliterations of Sanskrit. Some of these renderings are straightforward: *aa* = *ā*; *ee* = *ī*; *oo* = *ū*; final *h* or *ha* = *ḥ*. Others are less so: *ow* or *ou* = *au*; *r*, *ri*, or *ru* = *ṛ*; *ch* = *c* or *ch*; *gn* or *gy* = *jñ*. And some are simply confusing—the corresponding Indian letter can only be determined through context: initial *E* = *ī* or *e*; initial *Ea* = *ī*; *t*, *th*, *d*, or *dh* (all used interchangeably) = *t*, *th*, *ṭ*, *ṭh*, *d*, *dh*, *ḍ*, or *ḍh*; *n* = *ṇ*, *ñ*, *n*, or *ṇ*; *b* = *b*, *bh*, or (sometimes) *v*; *v* or *w* = *v* or *uv*; *m* = *m* or *ṃ* (= *m̐*), *s* or *sh* = *s*, *ṣ* or *ś*; *ō* = *o* (not *au*); *ē* = *e* (not *ai*).

Some discussion of my transliteration hereunder of the term “avatar” is perhaps also in order. Geoffrey Parrinder (1970:7), in his major monograph *Avatar and In-*

⁵ NB As we will see, both to himself, and to his devotees, Sathya Sai Baba is very much “the Avatar”, God in human form. Indeed, when pronouns are used by his devotees to refer to him, or in quoting him, they are almost invariably given capitalized initials (e.g. He, My). I have not adopted this practice, but mean no disrespect thereby—recent editions of the Oxford English Dictionary declare it to be “old-fashioned”, and it is also perhaps inappropriate, given the (ideally) neutral academic perspective that I am aiming to employ hereunder, for me to be lending support to devotees’ assertions of Sathya Sai Baba’s divinity.

carnation, points out that the word “avatar” long ago entered into the English language, hence his—and, for some additional reasons that I will now note—my usage of it in unitalicized form, without diacritics. One of my main problems is that Sathya Sai Baba uses a variety of forms of this word. Sometimes he uses the Sanskrit form “*avatāra*”, which has prominence in some of the traditional “scriptures” to which he refers—but his discourses are usually delivered in Telugu, and the basic Telugu form of this word is *avatāramu*. At other times, he uses *avatār*—a common North Indian vernacular form. Furthermore, these forms are variously transliterated by his translators (*Avathar*, *Avathaar*, *Avataara* etc.), and additional variety is found in English language works of, or about, other modern figures who have claimed to be avatars (*Avatar*, *Avatār*, *Avatāra*, etc.). By using the English word ‘avatar’, I mean to include all of these variations. Employing the English form is even useful when referring to Sanskrit traditions—for, as we will see, avatar-like ideas are very much present in some traditions from which the term *avatāra* is absent (most famously, the *Bhagavad-Gītā*). Of course, when I specifically wish to refer to the word “*avatāra*”, I will use the Sanskrit form.

As will soon become apparent, I have festooned the titles of my chapters (and of some of my sections) with various English words that are rough synonyms of “avatar” (“Embodiment”, ‘Incarnation’, “Manifestation”, “Descent”, “Theophany”, and “Epiphany”). Freda Matchett (2001:1), in one of the most recent academic studies of avatars, suggests that:

Translation of Avatar as ‘incarnation’ ‘is misleading because it suggests too strong a resemblance to the Incarnation of Christian theology. The Latin *incarnatio* ...implies that what is important in the Christian concept is that the divine personage should be ‘in the flesh’, i.e. totally real in human terms, all of a piece with the rest of human history.⁶ Whereas Christians have been reluctant to use words like ‘appearance’ or ‘manifestation’ of their incarnate Lord, such ideas are implicit in the term *avatāra*, since it has associations with the theatre.

But, as we will see, there are Hindu avatars who are very much portrayed as being ‘totally real in human terms’—although Matchett is right in that this is not predominantly the case. Also, while we will see that the term *avatāra* certainly has some theatrical analogues and associations, we will see that these are not intrinsic to the concept itself (see p.374). And I might further point out that in recent English usage, the term ‘incarnation’ has come to have the meaning of ‘appearance’—especially denoting a new and altered ‘form’ of a phenomenon—being used syn-

⁶ NB Others have made similar suggestions—cf. p.95 below.

onymously in this regard with the English word ‘manifestation’. Moreover, as we will see, “Incarnation”, and most of the other above-listed terms are used as synonyms in the English translations of Sathya Sai Baba’s discourses to which I have referred. The translators of these discourses do not, for the most part, imbue these terms with any great “technical” significance, nor will I.

Anthropologist Morton Klass (1991:81) notes the fact that there are ‘certain clear and essential differences to be observed between “atman” [‘self’ in Hinduism] and “soul” [in the ‘theistic’ religions i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam]’:

the atman of a living human is generally (well, reasonably “generally”) understood to be a separated particle of the universal divine substance that permeates the cosmos—that is in fact the cosmos. We may refer to this universal divine substance as *Brahman* or “Godhood” [sic]⁷ but not as “God”—if by the latter term we mean to imply sentience, or will, or separation from the rest of the universe [i.e. as (generally!) in the ‘theistic’ religions], and the Godhood, and the atman—are all in the end one and inseparable; even the seeming separate identity of the atman is in a deeper sense only an illusion [pp.90-91].

There is some truth in this generalisation, but Klass (1991:81) further implies that it entails some misleading translations in the Sathya Sai Baba literature—perhaps rendering *ātman* as “soul”, or *Brahman* as “God” in English. He asks rhetorically:

The words he uses must inevitably be translated into other languages: do they then convey the same message to people not only of different speech but of different religious traditions? Sathya Sai Baba, we have observed, claims to be “God”—but does he mean by that exactly what a monotheist understands that term to encompass?

Klass fails to note, however, that—in the overwhelming majority of Sathya Sai Baba literature—these key terms, and indeed almost all the “technical” (and sometimes, indeed, non-technical⁸) Sanskrit terms used by Sathya Sai Baba are left intact, sometimes without any translation being given⁹.

On the subject of translation, I would note that, in my several years of weekly attendance at official Sathya Sai Baba “Study Circle” discussions, no issues arose

⁷ NB Klass, primarily an anthropologist and, by his own admission, no expert scholar of religion [Klass (1991:7)], erroneously uses this term throughout his study, when what he means is ‘God-head’. Furthermore, this last term does itself, at least in some of its common usages, have the same personalistic undertones that he is seeking to avoid—witness its adoption by ISKCON. We may also note that there is a sense in which *Brahman* is both sentient and separate from the “rest of the universe”, the world being conceptualised as a mental projection of “name and form” upon *Brahman*, which is believed to be beyond these, yet also the originator of such mental projections.

⁸ E.g., witness the use of ‘Mathura Nagara’ for the “city of Mathura”, cited at the head of Chapter 1.

⁹ NB Palmer (2005:116) writes that ‘many western devotees thrive on eastern ways of doing things’, and this extends to a general reverence for Sanskrit—a large glossary of Sanskrit terms used by Sathya Sai Baba was compiled by a non-Indian (Victor Yap, 1998).

from the fact that all of his works that we discussed (the like of which will form my primary sources for this study) were translations from his native Telugu tongue—this despite native Telugu speakers sometimes being present. As best as I have been able to determine, the fact that these works are translations, has no significant ramifications for my study. Most of Sathya Sai Baba’s principal translators (e.g. N.Kasturi, V.K.Gokak, S.Bhagavantam, and Anil Kumar Kamaraju) have been academics of some distinction. It is true that, as ex-Sai devotee Brian Steel shows, these persons have often gone to some lengths to render into coherent English Sathya Sai Baba’s rambling Telugu speeches—factual errors on the part of Sathya Sai Baba are commonly corrected or omitted from the official translations, but as Steel concludes:

the editing process is closer to censoring, especially where ...SSB has made utterances which would cast doubt on the Omniscient or serenely Divine image projected by himself, his associates and his devotees.¹⁰

Any material that escapes such “censoring”, does seem to closely reflect the content, if not the style, of Sathya Sai Baba’s own expositions.

Icelandic parapsychologist Erlendur Haraldsson (1997:182) notes the suggestion of an early ex-devotee of Sathya Sai Baba that his discourses:

were mostly thoughts borrowed from Mr Kasturi, who was a very learned man and formerly a professor of a college in the city of Mysore. He had a good influence on Swami. In a way Kasturi was educating him.

But this is in sharp contrast with Kasturi’s own view of this matter—Kasturi writes as if in awe of Sathya Sai Baba’s knowledge:

Baba stopped short of the fifth form in high school¹¹, when He was fourteen years of age. He did not read books or learn from any teacher. He is Wisdom incarnate. He is poet, pundit, linguist, educationalist, artist, mystic - the best in each field. In His discourses He quotes freely from the Bible, the Koran, the poems of the Sufis, the dialogues of Socrates, the sayings of Johnson, the dicta of Herbert Spencer, Kant and Karl Marx, and from the myths and legends of ancient cultures [Sathyam-4 IV:141].

If Kasturi is not simply being deceptive (and all who knew him would vouch for his integrity), and if Sathya Sai Baba does indeed quote from all these sources (and he does, albeit perhaps second-hand), we can at least sympathize with the above-cited ex-devotee’s impression that he must have been getting such learned references from Kasturi—for it is inconceivable that he should have learned such things

¹⁰ <http://bdsteel.tripod.com/More/packageappo6.htm> [12-4-2007] See also <http://bdsteel.tripod.com/More/packagenewo4.htm> [12-4-2007].

¹¹ NB On Sathya Sai Baba’s schooling, see LIMF 128-129.s

in the course of his brief period of schooling (and perhaps unthinkable that he might actually know them by paranormal means)¹². Either way, as Steel’s work (unwittingly) shows, the edited/translated versions of Sathya Sai Baba’s discourses (whoever or wherever he may draw his ideas from) are far from complete fabrications on the part of his translators or editors¹³—the most prominent changes are excisions, stylistic “improvements”, and “corrections” of (usually) trivial facts¹⁴.

Finally, I should note that when I began this study in 2001, I was unaware that any standards of internet referencing had been set, hence, following general advice that I received at the start of my project, I have referenced all web-pages by simply giving their URL (address) and, in square brackets, the date that I most recently retrieved them from (or checked their presence on) the internet. With this information, most of them can be checked at the archive site <http://www.archive.org>. Those that have not been archived—and that have since changed or disappeared from the internet—will have to be taken on trust. Recently formulated standards for internet referencing demand fuller details than I have given (i.e. author, title, date of modification of file)¹⁵, but—whilst such details would in some cases be of help in overcoming this problem (perhaps assisting in the task of locating web sites with changed addresses)—they are still of no help in the case of material that has been removed from the internet. One of the more enthusiastic pro-Sathya Sai Baba internet activists has taken to using ‘screencaps’ (“captured” image files of unarchived websites) to overcome this problem¹⁶, but this too needs to be taken on trust—screencaps are surely as prone to tampering as any other form of electronic archiving. Even third-party archive sites like archive.org are hacked from time to time—I came across this more than once while attempting to look up an archived pro-Sathya Sai Baba website.

¹² Cf. Aitken (2004), pp.136-137.

¹³ NB For Kasturi’s views on his own translations of Sathya Sai Baba’s discourses, see LG 257-266.

¹⁴ Priddy writes: ‘The famous elderly editor of his journal, the retired journalist V.K.Narasimhan, told me that he corrected errors and mix-ups in SSB discourses when he translated and edited them. He was worried that he would be ‘brought to book’ (as my notes show he expressed it) by outsiders who hear the recorded tapes [which have long been officially sold as memorabilia to devotees] and compare them to his altered versions. (He died in 2000 without being brought to book). Narasimhan also told me how, while interpreting to English a talk by SSB on Kalidasa’s famous play about Shakuntala and the wedding ring, he mixed-up the story, making the ring a gift from Shakuntala to the king and not, as in the original, from the king to her. Narasimhan told me he whispered this to SSB, who told him to translate it just as he had said it, incorrectly. It did not much affect the point of the story’ (<http://home.chello.no/%7Ereirob/Myth.htm> [29-7-2006]).

¹⁵ See, e.g., Kate L. Turabian (2007), p.198.

¹⁶ E.g., <http://www.saisathyasai.com/baba/Ex-Baba.com/A-Priddy/caps-metatags6.html> [9-5-2007]



Fig.1 Some of the accommodation blocks at Prashanthi Nilayam, “The Abode of Supreme Peace”, Sathya Sai Baba’s main ashram, in the town of Puttaparthi, in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India.



Fig.2a Puttaparthi: Dozens of hotels and apartment buildings cater for spiritual tourism—the only industry. Part of the ashram is visible inside the rectangle (the rest is behind the hill at left).



Fig.2b Continuation of view to left of Fig.2b to show Sathya Sai Baba’s “Hillview Stadium” and the “Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning” (now “Sri Sathya Sai University”—it was recently officially ranked as the best university in India, and adopted as a national model).



Figs.2c, 2d & 2e Completion of 360° view (the left of Fig.2e overlaps with the right of Fig.2a): The broader environs of Puttaparthi—a sparsely populated section of Chitravathi River Valley.

1. INTRODUCTION TO AN INCARNATION

You will witness this Puttaparthi becoming Mathura Nagara.
No one can stop this development or delay it.¹⁷

From June to November of the year 2000, I spent five and a half months at the main ashram (“retreat”) of Hindu religious leader Sathya Sai Baba. “Prashanthi Nilayam” (“The Abode of Higher Peace”) as the ashram is called, is a large compound adjacent to the town of Puttaparthi, situated in a remote corner of the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh.

My primary motivations for visiting this place were personal and spiritual¹⁸, hence I made no ethnographic notes, but, for the sake of interest (and honesty), I will include in this chapter some recollections of, and reflections upon, my experiences from this

time. I will also draw upon some of the general knowledge of Sathya Sai Baba and his organisation that I have garnered from my interest in and personal involvement with these in my home country, New Zealand, over the last 13 years¹⁹.

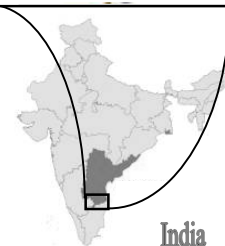
In the first section of this chapter, I will present a memoir of one of my personal encounters with Sathya Sai Baba, indicating and discussing, in the process, a significant factor in my motivation for undertaking this study—the fact that he personally encouraged me to do so. I will endeavour to show that the nature of Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings (and/or my understandings of them) are such that they ought, if anything, to contribute in a positive manner to my role as an “objective” scholar—although this ideal has itself been much problematized. I will discuss a number of scholarly challenges and responses to this ideal, some of which specifically relate to Sathya Sai Baba.



Fig.3a (above) The location of Puttaparthi in Andhra Pradesh (see also Fig.23 below).

Fig.3b (right) The location of Andhra Pradesh (shaded) in India.

NB See pp.710ff. below for sources & copyrights of these (& all) figures.



¹⁷ Sathya Sai Baba (21-10-1961) SSS2 101

¹⁸ For a typical outline of life in Prashanthi Nilayam see Norris Palmer (2005), pp.113-114.

¹⁹ See Palmer (2005:110-112) for an account of the practices of a Sathya Sai Baba Centre (in California) which tallies well with my experience of Sathya Sai Baba groups in New Zealand.

Concomitant to this, but especially in the second section of this chapter, I will point out that, regardless of my own particular position, Sathya Sai Baba *is*, surely, by any ordinary standards, worthy of study in his own right as a popular and controversial contemporary Hindu religious leader, and I will briefly discuss some of the specific accusations that have been levelled at him. I will also begin to justify my specific choice of topic for my thesis, my decision to focus upon his religious persona—especially his claims to be “the avatar” (in most Hindu traditions, an epochal “descent” or “incarnation” of God). I note that this identity is often invoked in the controversy surrounding him, and point out that it is intertwined with the “miracles” for which he is most famous; indeed, from his perspective, it is more important than them. It is to this identity that he refers in the quotation at the head of this chapter, a prophecy made at a time when Puttaparthi was a tiny fraction of its present size, in which he, nonetheless, predicts a future for it approximating that of ‘Mathura Nagara’, “the city of Mathura” (near Delhi), which is home to more than quarter of a million people—with millions more visiting as pilgrims each year on account of its being popularly identified as the birthplace of Kṛṣṇa, a figure traditionally represented as the penultimate and greatest of avatars.

Following this, in the third section of this chapter, I will outline my methods for what I decide will be my main task in this thesis, a contextualization of Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar claims with respect to as full a history of avatar ideas in India as I am able to construct. In the process, I will outline and briefly discuss a number of previous scholarly analyses of avatar ideas. I suggest that something can be taken from all of them, outlining, by way of example, ideas of the “mission” of the avatars—perhaps the only “universal” amongst avatar concepts. I conclude, however, that these previous studies do have limitations, in that they tend to oversimplify the long and extremely diverse history avatar ideas in India.

In the fourth section of this chapter, I will investigate some of Sathya Sai Baba’s, and some traditional, “definitions” of the term “avatar”. Some of Sathya Sai Baba’s definitions, I note to be “innovative”, and in this connection I discuss this term and the much problematized idea of “tradition” (as a background against which one might innovate). Again, I conclude that, so long as these terms are not understood in a rigid or essentialist manner, they have some descriptive and analytical utility. I also present and discuss definitions of some other academic terms that I suggest will be of relevance to my focus—especially “charisma” and (Max Weber’s types of) “authority”. Finally, I note that scholarly studies of Sathya Sai

Baba have put forward opposing views as to whether he ought to be considered as a “traditionalist”—both *vis-à-vis* “innovation” and *vis-à-vis* “modernity”—and I decide to investigate this as an important secondary issue.

In Chapter 2, I will engage more fully with some of the academic literature on Sathya Sai Baba that reflects upon of my chosen focus, Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar persona. I will firstly consider what scholars have said of his relationship to his predecessor, Sai Baba of Shirdi, and to a number of similar figures. Drawing upon Sathya Sai Baba’s speeches and upon traditional and ethnographic works, I will then contribute, over and above (and in contrast to) what other scholars have done, a more significant portrayal of Sathya Sai Baba’s caste background (noting this to derive from a highly regarded group of royal bards/genealogists) and a more balanced view of his sectarian affiliation and of the chronological development of his avatar persona (from early in his career, he has invoked both Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva forms). I will also discuss some issues of chronological periodization for the main body of my study. I decide use the terms “ancient”, “medieval”, and “modern” on analogy with Western history (as well known descriptive terms), but, in keeping with recent Indological practice, taking the “modern” period in India as beginning towards the end of the 18th century CE.

In Chapter 3, I will begin my “history of the avatar idea as it relates to Sathya Sai Baba”, with the first of several rough chronological and thematic groupings of traditional material relating to avatar ideas. Here, I focus upon their ancient antecedents in the oldest strata of Indian religious literature, especially discussing some scholarly suggestions that avatar ideas are a product of the “Axial Age”. Nature deities and shamanic traditions; sacred kingship (both heavenly and earthly); early ritual and sacrificial traditions (and the episteme of “resemblance” that arises from them); early yogic and philosophical viewpoints (and especially the ideas of “enumeration”, “categorization” and “interiorization” that develop with in them); and, of course, traditional epic tales, all play a part in this, and we will see distant echoes of all of these (and some specific echoes of the literature in question here) in Sathya Sai Baba’s persona and teachings. I will also investigate the elevated status of bards/poets, Sathya Sai Baba’s distant forebears, in relation to that of the king.

In Chapter 4, I will focus upon medieval traditions, roughly categorizing this material according to its form and/or function, and in line with a loose chronological progression. I begin with some traditional lists and typologies of the avatars, and then move to some traditions using specific “technical” terms. Following

this, I will focus upon the traditional schools of systematic philosophy (especially *advaita*), before engaging in a detailed consideration of the academic idea of “inclusivism” as it has been used to describe “the attitude of later traditions to earlier (and especially “alien”) ones” in Indian contexts. I will then focus upon devotional and South Indian traditions that impinge upon ideas of the avatar. Many of the themes of earlier chapters recur here, but it is significant to note their presence in contexts geographically and temporally closer to Sathya Sai Baba.

In Chapter 5, I will focus upon modern avatar ideas in India. I will consider the origins and nature of “Neo-Hinduism”, and distinguish this from “traditionalism”, investigating Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar ideas in relation to these two major strands of modern Indian religion. I will also consider suggestions that there is a strong Hindu Nationalist component to Sathya Sai Baba’s persona, and will ponder the influence of Western spiritual(ist) traditions upon attitudes to “the avatar” in nineteenth and twentieth century India. I will then compare and contrast Sathya Sai Baba to other prominent modern (including contemporary) avatar figures.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I will develop a few themes that I feel need some separate attention, especially adding some observations upon Sathya Sai Baba’s presentation of himself as an exemplar, and upon his ideas in relation to Docetism—a Christian term, but one that we will see to present a close parallel to some (including traditional) views of the avatars. I will conclude with some general discussion of the nature, form, and validity, of my own study as a whole, and by outlining some specific answers that it provides to questions or issues that scholars have raised in regard to Sathya Sai Baba and the avatar traditions.

1.1 Oriental Objectivity

In truth, the subjective world and the objective world are not two; they are only aspects of the One.¹

In 1991, when I was about to begin my studies at the University of Canterbury, I had a lot of trouble in deciding which courses to take. Consequently, I attended a number of introductory lectures given by a wide variety of disciplines, in the hope that this would help with my decision. One of these lectures was in Philosophy, and during the course of the lecture something occurred which has stuck with me ever since. True to his profession, the lecturer was employing the Socratic Method and asking the students a number of difficult but interesting questions. One of these questions was: “How can you know if something is true or not?” This is no doubt a good question—and one that has kept philosophers busy for centuries—but it was the answer that a student gave to this question that struck me as particularly unusual. This student said, perhaps only half-seriously, ‘Find an omniscient being, and ask them [*sic*]’. To my surprise, the lecturer took this completely seriously and said something like, “Yes, Philosophy 103 is for you”. I thought at the time that this was totally fanciful and a complete waste of time, but at least it helped with my choice of courses—Philosophy was not for me.

Only years later, after taking courses in Religious Studies, did I realise that such an epistemological procedure was not as unusual as I had imagined it to be, with variations upon it being sanctioned by many popular religious groups in the past and even today. I could not have imagined then, that ten years later I would still be at University and still be unsure as to what courses I should be studying. Still less could I have imagined that I would travel to India, find a person who claimed to be omniscient, and feel compelled to enquire of this person what course of study I should undertake. But, this, it would seem, was to be my fate. In October 2000, after spending four months at Sathya Sai Baba’s main ashram, I was accorded the rare opportunity of speaking to him in person².

As I was well aware, Sathya Sai Baba is professed both by himself, and by many of his followers, to be omniscient—to know all things. He is supposed to know all

¹ Sathya Sai Baba (23-11-1984) S17 29:183 [See ‘Abbreviations’ section, pp.6-7 above].

² As Palmer (2005:114) writes, ‘a private audience with Baba... [is] highly prized by devotees and is considered *the* high point of not only one’s own visit to the ashram but also of one’s entire life’. The pictures above give something of an indication of the size of the ashram; the crowds at his daily public audiences (*darśans*) number, on average, in the thousands (see, e.g. Figs.4,5 below); it is simply not possible for Sathya Sai Baba to give personal attention to all who visit him.

languages³ (including, for example, Russian⁴, Swahili⁵ and Maori⁶) and indeed claims that he ‘knows everything of all things’. He makes statements like: ‘I know your name, your degrees, your profession, your status and your history’⁷—or:

I know everybody. Not only the students here [of the university for which he is Chancellor]. I know everybody all over the world. I know the students, their brothers, their sisters, their parents, forefathers -- everybody I know. ...I know the members of your family. I know your marks in every subject.

He ought, I thought, to be as good a careers-advisor as any, and I thus intended to ask him for some vocational guidance.

As I was also well aware, however, Sathya Sai Baba claims to often feign ignorance in order to give his devotees ‘the satisfaction and joy of being spoken to by Him’⁸. He is notorious for not giving straight answers to questions, and my case only served to exemplify this:

Sai: What are you doing?

Mike: What should I do?

Sai: No! No! No! What *are* you doing? Next year.

Mike: I have been studying...

Sai: But you failed.

Mike: No. I have finished a B.A., should I do an M.A.?

Sai: What are you studying?

Mike: Religion.

Sai: What is the meaning of ‘Religion’?

Mike: ‘Religion’ means ‘to link back to God’...

Sai: No, no, no. Religion is Realization.

My answer is a stock one—a traditional etymology of this word—popular in the New-Age circles I was apt to frequent. His answer is a quotation from one of the most famous Hindu religious leaders of modern times, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902)⁹. Most curiously, Sathya Sai Baba is on record elsewhere as propagating a

³ http://groups.yahoo.com/group/saidevotees_worldnet/message/1869 [7-3-2007]

⁴ http://groups.yahoo.com/group/saidevotees_worldnet/message/1876 [3-8-2006]

⁵ http://groups.yahoo.com/group/saidevotees_worldnet/message/1879 [3-8-2006]

⁶ Kura Baker, *Treasured Memories* (Auckland: Sathya Sai Publications of New Zealand), p.10.

⁷ Sathya Sai Baba (18-9-1985) S18 21:125; (12-4-1959) S1 20:124

⁸ http://groups.yahoo.com/group/saidevotees_worldnet/message/1880 [3-8-2006] NB See also http://groups.yahoo.com/group/saidevotees_worldnet/message/1967 [7-3-2007]

⁹ The point here, in the words of Vivekananda, is as follows: ‘Religion is realisation, and you must make the sharpest distinction between talk and realisation. What you perceive in your soul is realisation’ [Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, 10th edition (1970-73), vol.4, p.30].

definition of religion combining both of these aspects:

The word ‘religion’ contains the prefix ‘re’. ‘Re’ means doing something again. The other part of the word connotes ‘unifying’. Religion may be thus interpreted as re-union, the reunification of two entities separated by time or the restoration of their original organic unity... The restoration of the primal unity of ‘Atma’ [self] and ‘Pa-ramatma’ [God] through self-realisation is the primary function of religion.¹⁰

Indeed, I had read some of his words to this effect prior to my interview with him. What, I wondered, could be Sathya Sai Baba’s purpose in refusing to acknowledge that I was—according to his own published teachings—at least half correct?

Whatever his purpose, the effect of this seemingly self-contradictory denial of my answer was to deflect me from my attempt to gain vocational guidance. I found myself asking him a more “spiritual” question:

Mike: What *sādhana* [spiritual practice] should I do, to “realize”?

Sai: What is the meaning of *sādhana*?

Mike: *Sādhana* is an “instrument”, a means for realization.

Sai: No, no, no. *Sādhana* is *sa-dhāna*—“having divine wealth”.

Mike: How to acquire divine wealth?

Sai: Rituals, puja, worship...

Mike: Not necessary?

Sai: No, not necessary. Think of God.

Another “wrong” literal definition on my part, it would seem. Sathya Sai Baba is here making a pun with the Sanskrit word *sadhāna* (wealthy), and perhaps a further pun between the syllable “sa” (with) and the word *saḥ* (he)—a common traditional pronoun for God (i.e. *saḥ dhāna*, divine wealth). His point in this is perhaps elucidated by the following passage, which I later came across in one of his published speeches:

neither *Sadhana* (spiritual endeavour) nor *Sadhyam* (fulfilment) exists independently and apart from each other. *Sadhana* and *Sadhyam* are one and the same. It is a trick of the mind to make *Sadhana* as the means to *Sadhyam* (the Goal). True *Sadhana* consists in giving up the *anaatma bhava* (the idea that one is not the Spirit but the physical body). To turn the vision from the physical to the spiritual constitutes real *Sadhana* [(1-1-1991) S24 1:2,3].

Since, at the time, I had been abiding by the popular New-Age (Mahayana Buddhist) spiritual dictum “the path is the goal”—often interpreted as an encouragement to persist with spiritual practices even when it appears that they are not producing any tangible spiritual results—Sathya Sai Baba’s point, from my perspec-

¹⁰ Sathya Sai Baba (1979) SSB 79:55 NB On “realization”, see Lawrence Babb (1986), pp.218.

tive, seems to be that one's focus should be very much on "the goal" rather than "the path". Indeed, he says in a passage immediately preceding that just quoted, that all spiritual practices may at best 'provide some sort of mental satisfaction', and, elsewhere, answers a specific question about the 'path to Divinity' as follows:

When there is a path, there must be a name and a form. Divinity is beyond name and form, so there is no path to Divinity. The only thing is realisation. If you know this, that will [be] sufficient unto itself. There is no path.¹¹

In light of this (hardly novel) theology—presenting 'Divinity' as transcendent to the phenomenal world—Sathya Sai Baba's rejection of my answers to his questions is somewhat more understandable than it otherwise might be. By this line of thinking, any attribution of (absolute) validity to any name or form (Religion, *sādhana*, "the path" etc.) must ultimately be abandoned. Accordingly, when questioning his followers on philosophical matters Sathya Sai Baba is said to almost invariably reject any answers they may give to his questions—even (or perhaps especially) if these answers are drawn from their knowledge of his teachings¹².

But theology is far from the minds of most who receive Sathya Sai Baba's personal attention—much of his time is spent ministering to their various "worldly" problems—and this proved to be so in my case also. After spending some time talking to other members of the small group of New Zealanders that I was with¹³, Sathya Sai Baba turned to me with what seemed to be an answer to the question that I had asked him at the beginning of the interview:

Sai: Keep studying, very young age!

Mike: Should I do an M.A.?

Sai: ...Yes.

Mike: What topic for an M.A. Swami, I need a topic.

Sai: What is History?

Mike: ...History is His story.

Sai: Yes! History is His story.

I later discovered a passage in which Sathya Sai Baba expands upon what he sees as the religious significance of this last aphorism¹⁴—employing morals drawn from

¹¹ http://groups.yahoo.com/group/saidevotees_worldnet/message/1971 [7-3-2007]

¹² V. Kumar (a long-time close associate of Sathya Sai Baba) in a talk given in New Zealand (2006).

¹³ NB Sathya Sai Baba rarely calls individuals for a personal audience with him—hence, to maximize their chances of meeting him, devotees often form themselves into groups along lines of nationality.

¹⁴ NB The aphorism "History is His story" is common in contemporary Christian preaching, as well as having some currency as a feminist criticism of centuries of androcentric historical writing. It presumably comes to Sathya Sai Baba via the former source—or, perhaps, he has (re-)coined it in-

the story of Rāma (one of the major traditional avatar figures):

“His Story is History.” It means that the story of God is History. ...How He had mastered His senses and mind during all the vicissitudes of life, how He was neither elated by pleasure nor depressed by pain.... This story of His which describes His equanimity under all circumstances of pleasure or pain and loss or gain, is what is known as History.¹⁵

Again, then, the main ideal here is the overcoming of dualities, but I was not aware of this at the time, and before I could ask him to clarify his answer, his attention was diverted elsewhere.

When, towards the end of the interview I asked him again what I ought to study for an MA, he merely said: ‘Don’t change anything’. I took this to mean that undertaking an MA in Religious Studies was to be my fate. I imagined that I should probably do an MA on some aspect of traditional (purāṇic) lore (this had been my stated intention before going to India) and I struggled for six months to find a topic for such a study. After exhausting all other possibilities, I finally turned my attention upon the source of my primary motivation for studying. Perhaps “His story”, the story of Sathya Sai Baba as self-proclaimed deity, was in need of (re)telling, and perhaps I was the person to do it. As an “insider” to the Sathya Sai Organisation, I certainly had easy access to most of the relevant primary source material and indeed had already informally read a great deal of it. This was an important advantage, for the writings and speeches of Sathya Sai Baba alone amount to some sixty-odd volumes, to which can be added the several hundreds of books written by his devotees, and a long list of ever-expanding internet sites carrying information about him¹⁶. Indeed, even after choosing what I thought was a fairly narrow topic, by the end of my allotted time for completing an MA, I already had material sufficient (quantity-wise, that is) for a PhD. Thus, after a short trip to India in 2002 to receive Sathya Sai Baba’s blessings for such an expanded un-

dependently. As we will see, gender-inclusive language is all too rare in the English translations of Sathya Sai Baba’s works; as Lawrence Babb (1986:173), author of a number of anthropologically-oriented studies of Sathya Sai Baba, writes: ‘He is no feminist, but by his own lights he has a deep concern for the welfare of women, as evidenced by the attention he has given women’s education’.

¹⁵ The significance of this also rests on an assertion he makes earlier in this discourse that the word ‘*Charithra* (history) is derived from “*charayalu*” (the actual actions) of people... not from mere writings’ (24-5-1992) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume25/sss25-15.pdf> [1-8-2006].

¹⁶ NB In addition to simply making available much primary source material on Sathya Sai Baba, some of these sites also enter into in-depth debate about him. Whilst, as we will see, this does tend to come from either strongly pro-Sai or anti-Sai viewpoints, such biases are sometimes no more significant than those in evidence in some of the academic views that we will encounter in this study (e.g., tendencies towards excessive reductionism along Freudian, Marxist, or even more liberal psychological, sociological or anthropological lines). I will thus accord such views some space below.

dertaking, I decided that this should be my aim. To my knowledge, little had been written about Sathya Sai Baba in the academic world¹⁷. I imagined that it should be relatively easy for me to make a contribution.

Of course, this proved to be much more difficult than I had expected; a task beset (as is any doctoral study) with many theoretical and practical problems. Recent historiography has, for example, raised loud objections to the implications of parsing ‘history’ in the manner exemplified above by Sathya Sai Baba and reiterated by myself; my initial idea of writing “his story” is in itself problematic. David Carr (2006:120) characterizes the argument here:

If historians are essentially telling stories about the past, their activity seems more literary than scientific. ...The proper place for narrative is fiction, which is by definition unconcerned with the reality of the events it portrays.

But, as Carr (2006:120-121) goes on to write:

Against this sceptical view, it can be argued that the very reality of history – *res gestae*, which are human acts and experiences, plans and projects – already has the narrative form in which historical writing is largely cast. ...this form is found even below the level of explicit story-telling and is characteristic of the way time is humanly experienced and structured.

And Carlo Ginzburg (1999:103) points that narratives ‘play an important role ...in every form of historical research and writing, including the most analytical’. Similarly, whilst Peter Burke (1990:282) cites scholarly suggestions that any attempt to present ‘the facts’ of history is problematic and ‘that historians employ rhetorical strategies, or that... historical writing is a form of myth’, Ginzburg points out that proof (at least up to the level of “infinite likelihood”) is an integral part of rhetoric as it was traditionally conceived and as it is utilized by historians today.

Moreover, at the same time as some historians are problematizing much (traditional) Western historical writing, others (coming, significantly, from a more literary background) are finding history in traditional works that have more often been categorized as myth. Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (2001:4)—promoting the view that there may be historicity in some early (especially medieval) traditional Indian narratives¹⁸—posit that making a ‘distinction between ‘factual’ and ‘fictional’ narrative’ is a human universal, rec-

¹⁷ This was before a boom in information technology resources shattered my illusions—as we will see in Chapter 2, there is in fact a reasonably large number of academic studies of Sathya Sai Baba.

¹⁸ NB Narayana Rao et al. (2001:11-12) cite Herodotus as a prototypical example of ‘openness to ‘myth’’, contrasting him in this regard with Thucydides, but others (cited by Burke) have seen Thucydides as a prototypical example of the idea that history itself is ‘myth’—pointing out that his *History of the Peloponnesian War* closely follows the paradigm of Greek tragedy.

ommending attention to the ‘texture’ of factual historical works in this regard. Of course, texture can be misleading. Works can be deliberately imbued with a factual texture—to heighten dramatic effect or deliberately mislead¹⁹—and Burke rhetorically (1990:283) asks: ‘If there is an irreducibly mythical element in all historical writing, does anything go, are there no criteria for preferring one account or interpretation of the past to another?’ He does not answer this question (at least, not in this article)²⁰, but, as Ginzburg (1999:101) points out, such views are simplistic, for they focus upon ‘the final literary product, disregarding the research (archival, philological, statistical, and so forth) that made it possible’. And in such research, there are, certainly, many such criteria. If not “facts”, at least sources of information can be thoroughly documented (as I will certainly do), and evidence can be provided as to the reliability of these sources (I did this earlier, pp.14ff.).

Some testament to my own reliability is also perhaps in order—all the more due to my personal involvement with the object of my study. As Rita M. Gross (2004: 113) writes:

A common prejudice in the discipline of religious studies is that the best scholars are “objective” detached from and uninvolved with their subject matter. ...However, because objectivity is impossible, it is important to rethink conventional assumptions regarding the relationship between religious identity and teaching or doing research on religion.

Gross (2004:115) concludes that ‘the closest semblance to neutrality we can achieve is to be aware of and self-conscious concerning the identities that influence our teaching and scholarship’. Accordingly, as José Ignacio Cabezón (2006: 32-34) writes, ‘an increasing number of [non-Christian] scholars are choosing to “come out” as believers and practitioners’, and, moreover:

a subset of religiously “out” scholars of nonwestern religious traditions, not content simply to embody this dual commitment silently, have begun to write in discursive modes that are at once “insider” and “scholarly”.

Cabezón (2006:28-29) sees this as a legitimate corrective to the problem of scholars of religion (in general) exhibiting an unconscious propensity for ‘an implicit denigration of the Other... a denial of the fact that criticality, theory, and self-awareness are *also* concerns for religion(s) in general’. Being an exponent of the religion I am studying can only help to counter this tendency²¹.

¹⁹ On the former, see, e.g., Burke (1990), p.280; on the latter, see E.Hobsbawm & T.Ranger (1983).

²⁰ Burke (1997:191ff.) promotes what he calls ‘Anthropological History’ as an answer to this, but there is no space here for me to fully engage with his ideas and arguments.

²¹ On this, see also Christoph Schwöbel (2004).

Cabezón (2006:33) notes, however, that there is a sense in which ‘the Other becomes problematic when we claim to BE-THEM’. He opts to solve this problem by legitimizing non-Christian theology as an academic pursuit, but, whilst there will inevitably be a few overt theological (or hagiological) tinges to my work, I will not go this far²². I will very much treat Sathya Sai Baba and his followers as “the Other”; they, not my own ideas and understandings, constitute the primary objects of my study. As Gross (2004:117) points out:

Identification as a scholar is critical. Whatever other identities one may have, this one cannot be absent.... Being an insider is not enough, because insiders are often mistaken about their tradition or have limited perspectives on it.

Cabezón (2006:29) too finds it necessary to add a disclaimer to the aspersions he casts upon scholarly pretensions to critical objectivity:

I do not wish to be read as implying that criticality, rigor, theoretical sophistication, and self-awareness are not virtues—that these are not qualities we should be striving for in our scholarship.

For my part, I have adopted these as virtues, and, whilst my identity as an insider remains a significant fact, for the most part, I believe it contributes in a positive way to my role as a scholar. Gross (2004:118) notes that ‘a scholar-insider has distinct advantages *in some cases* (but not all) because of the necessary link between experience and knowledge’, exemplifying this by referring to living esoteric traditions—the like of which by definition exclude outsiders from (experiential) knowledge of their inner workings, and I would add that (*in some cases*, including my own) there are other, more subtle, advantages.

Relevant here is an observation by Donald Stone (1978:149), who refers to a suggestion by the famous psychologist Abraham Maslow:

“love” or “affinity” for the subject being researched may produce a special kind of objectivity which he calls “Taoist objectivity”.... ‘At the very least this kind of love produces interest and even fascination, and therefore great patience with long hours of observation’.

Without an affinity for Sathya Sai Baba, I could not have coped with the challenges of intense involvement at his ashram in India—sitting cross-legged on the ground for 12 hours a day for four months waiting for a chance to speak to him—nor could I have motivated myself to read through the huge corpus of Sai literature, nor would I have put as much time as I have into thinking about, writing and editing this study. In this sense, simply by being better informed and acquainted

²² For an example of what my work might have been like if I had attempted to write in this vein, see the work of Religious Studies doctoral graduate Lex Hixon (1996) on Ramakrishna.

with my *objects* of study than I might otherwise be, I ought to be more “objective”.

There are also a number of features of Sathya Sai Baba’s philosophy, to which I am committed, that can only contribute to my objectivity as a scholar. The Sathya Sai Service Organization is a non-proselytizing sect—formal publicity (excepting of special events) is banned, and Sathya Sai Baba has even said that he has ‘not come to found a new creed, to breed a new faction, to install a new God’²³. I ought thus to have no motive to attempt to convert my readers. Nor ought I to have any motive to portray Sathya Sai Baba in an unrealistically positive light, for he says: ‘I do not appreciate your extolling Me, describing My glory. State the facts. That produces joy. It is sacrilege to state more or less’²⁴. Moreover, as a Sai devotee, I am supposed to be committed to the ideal of truth—‘voicing the seen exactly as seen, the thought exactly as it formed, the deed exactly as done’²⁵—and to not being guided in my actions by predilections²⁶, likes or dislikes²⁷, desire for success, or fear of failure²⁸. I am supposed to be detached, adopting the attitude of a witness to my internal and external world²⁹ and am urged not to identify with any of the transient phenomena that I encounter therein³⁰. At the same time, I am supposed to see myself in all³¹, to ‘understand others and sympathise with them’³², and to thoroughly consider ‘all points of view’ before drawing conclusions³³.

But perhaps my very choice of topic, my decision to focus upon Sathya Sai Baba, in itself constitutes a major compromise to my objectivity? Here I would draw upon an observation by another scholar and (one time) Sathya Sai Baba devotee, Greg Gerson (1998:2,31), who cites a recent work on what has been called “heuristic methodology” to the effect that ‘a research problem or issue which matters deeply to the investigator will undoubtedly also have significance on a societal and perhaps even universal level’. Certainly, due to the sheer size and diversity of Sathya Sai Baba’s following (highlighted by Figures 4 & 5 below),

²³ Sathya Sai Baba (21-6-1979) S11 45:290-291

²⁴ Sathya Sai Baba (10-1961) S2 22:115

²⁵ (5-12-1985) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume18/sss18-26.pdf> [7-3-2007]

²⁶ Sathya Sai Baba (19-8-1965) S5 36:203

²⁷ Sathya Sai Baba (23-11-1962) S2 49:274

²⁸ Sathya Sai Baba (6-3-1977) S13 29:189

²⁹ Sathya Sai Baba (8-12-1964) S4 52:298,299

³⁰ See, e.g., Sathya Sai Baba (22-5-1992) S25 20:222,223

³¹ See, e.g., Sathya Sai Baba (7-7-1963) S3 16:97

³² Sathya Sai Baba DV 75

³³ Sathya Sai Baba C XLVI 125-126

my general topic is of significance at a societal level, and, as I will go on to show, the magnitude and complexity of his religious persona, upon which I will more specifically focus, is commensurate with this following.

The majority of Sathya Sai Baba's followers are Hindu and of Indian ethnicity, and seem to regard him as an "avatar" (a "descent" of a deity) akin to the most re-



Fig.4 The author carries the New Zealand flag in a parade of delegates representing more than a hundred countries in front of a crowd of at least quarter of a million Sai devotees assembled in the Hillview Stadium (see Fig.2b above) to celebrate Sathya Sai Baba's 75th birthday in November 2000.



Fig.5 An aerial photo of the crowd in the Hillview Stadium on Sathya Sai Baba's 70th Birthday.

vered figures of this type in traditional Indian scriptural works. But his appeal is by no means exclusive to Indians, and indeed the sight of large groups of pilgrims from such unlikely quarters as China, Spain, South America, and Eastern Europe is not an uncommon one at his ashram. Followers from a Christian background tend to identify him with the “rider on the white horse” from the Biblical book of *Revelation* or the “Cosmic Christ” of more recent Christian theology³⁴. Some Muslims claim him to be the long-awaited *Mahdī*, the Messiah of Islam³⁵, and in Sri Lanka he has a Buddhist following who view him as the next Buddha³⁶. Sathya Sai Baba certainly encourages the former of these identifications, perhaps due to its parallel with prophetic descriptions of the expected final avatar of Hindu lore³⁷, but he has, as far as I am aware, made no reference to the latter two claims. Indeed, he does not always jump at the opportunity to portray himself as the fulfilment of foreign religious traditions. Some Jewish devotees are reported to have once asked him:

Q: Is Sai the Messiah of the Jews?

Sai: That is not for Swami to say. That must be determined by you. The real Messiah is the totality of good. Sai is not any particular thing. He is everything [MBI 192].

Here, alongside issues of his religious identity, he brings his particular theological convictions to the fore. Whatever the first part of his answer may mean (‘the totality of good’), the last part seems clear as another disavowal of a dualistic religious construct (Sai as Messiah), similar to his dismissal of my above-mentioned attempted definitions of ‘Religion’ and ‘*sādhana*’. The theology at work here is elucidated by another passage from his speeches:

God is all. He is all forms, His is all names. There is no place where He is not; no moment when He is not! Even the devil has the syllable ‘dev’ to indicate his affinity [‘dev’ (Sanskrit *deva*) meaning ‘god’ in many Indian languages].³⁸

This is an obverse case of the theology of transcendence identified previously—the immanence of God is emphasized here, but to the same non-dualistic effect. Clearly, some of Sathya Sai Baba’s statements bear more than a superficial reading.

This can, however, be overdone. Morton Klass (1991:94-95) picks up on a milder form of the reasoning in evidence above, quoting Sathya Sai Baba as giving an example of the common Hindu ‘equation of “guru”—in principle, *any* teacher—

³⁴ See, e.g., Peter Phipps (1996), p.161.

³⁵ Sanjay Kant, *God Descends on Earth*, (Bangalore, Sai Towers Publishing, 1995), p. 17-18.

³⁶ C. J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992), p.179

³⁷ See Section 5.3, p.338 below.

³⁸ (23-7-1971) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume11/sss11-29.pdf> [9-7-2007]

and “God”’. Klass suggests that this renders Sathya Sai Baba’s claims to be “God” rather less extraordinary than they might seem to non-Hindus, but we will see that Sathya Sai Baba’s claim to divinity is something extraordinary even in Hindu contexts. In fact, Klass (1991:161) himself tells of a case amongst Hindus in Trinidad in which Sathya Sai Baba’s claim to divinity was contested by some of the local Hindu leaders, via ‘a communication to practicing pandits’:

advising them not to permit pictures of Sathya Sai Baba at services over which they preside.... They are advised to object to bhajans [devotional songs] that are revised to include the name of Sathya Sai Baba, and so on.

There are even, he says, ‘incidents of pandits lecturing in the streets to passers-by, claiming that Sathya Sai Baba is a charlatan and no avatar’. To this I would add that the results of a multi-choice questionnaire that parapsychologist Erlendur Haraldsson (1997:226ff.,233) put to a number of persons of Indian ethnicity show that Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar claim alienated several of his earliest devotees.

It is true that such views are in the minority, but there does not seem to be any significant cultural bias in the more usual view amongst devotees—that Sathya Sai Baba is indeed an avatar. Haraldsson’s conclusion was that ‘the great majority of the respondents... felt that Baba was an avatar’, and this holds true of most Indian Sathya Sai Baba devotees that I have encountered. Moreover, despite the above-noted suggestion by Klass, anthropologist Bob Exon (1997:172), interviewing Western devotees of Sathya Sai Baba, notes that they too ‘seem to have no problem accepting that he is God incarnate’. Christian scholar Reinhart Hummel (1984:18-19) confirms that Sathya Sai Baba’s fulfilling this role is a key factor in his attraction to Westerners, although he casts this in a somewhat sinister light as he refers to Sathya Sai Baba’s ‘anti-Christian potential’—i.e. that he ‘presents himself consciously as substitute Christ... and is, in that sense, an anti-Christ’³⁹.

Sathya Sai Baba’s divine persona is, then, a topic of sufficient depth, complexity, and cross-cultural import, to warrant further investigation. But anthropologist Lawrence Babb (1987:170) raises another potential problem with any attempt, such as my present one, to give an “objective” account of Sathya Sai Baba:

The first thing that must be said about Sathya Sai Baba is that the man himself is

³⁹ NB Whilst, so far as I am aware, none of Sathya Sai Baba’s followers from Christian backgrounds see him as fulfilling the traditional eschatological role of the “Antichrist”, it is interesting to note that the fact that contemporary American religious leader José Luis de Jesús Miranda (b.1946) consciously presents himself both as the “Second Coming of Christ” and as the Antichrist seems to be popular with his large international following—see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jose_Luis_de_Jesus_Miranda [27-5-2007]. Even if, as some of Sathya Sai Baba’s critics would like, Sathya Sai Baba were to be widely proclaimed to be the Antichrist, this might not detract from his appeal.

nearly impossible to find. ...Submerged somewhere in the hubbub and symbolic paraphernalia of his cult is a person that we, as outside observers, would call the “real man.” But whoever this real Sathya Sai Baba is, he is inaccessible....

I would argue, however, that we do have one important window on the “real Sathya Sai Baba”—his speeches. However heavily edited they may be before publication (see p.14 above), they are invariably delivered *ex tempore*. As he put it in the course of giving one of his early speeches: ‘without my conscious effort, words are bursting out from within my stomach’⁴⁰. And even his writings are usually suffixed with the title *Vahini*, giving the sense of “stream (of consciousness)”. Not that his works are completely disorderly, he generally employs traditional scriptures or concepts in the structure of his own outpourings, but the style is direct and informal, and so should from this perspective give us a good indication of his “real” ways of thinking.

Babb’s assertion, as we will see (p.97), is partly based upon his assessment of Sathya Sai Baba’s “authorized biography”, *Sathyam Sivam Sundaram* (“Truth, Goodness, Beauty”), written by N. Kasturi. Sathya Sai Baba himself acknowledges that this work might appear ‘like a fairy tale’ to its readers—who even, he is said to have told Kasturi, might ‘doubt your sanity’. Nevertheless, he claims that future generations would ‘blame’ Kasturi for ‘underestimating’ his greatness⁴¹. For Sathya Sai Baba, if anything, Kasturi has erred on the side of caution. Still, Kasturi was an author of independent renown⁴², and his works displays as much of a literary as a historical consciousness (which they do display—Kasturi taught history at university level for many years). Thus, despite Sathya Sai Baba’s comments, *Sathyam Sivam Sundaram* strays far from being a detached presentation of reasonably determinable historical facts. Cambridge scholar Deborah Swallow’s (1982:126) characterization of it as ‘dramatic, exaggerated, simplistic, unsophisticated, and intellectually undemanding’ is only slightly overstated⁴³.

Accordingly, Babb (1986:161-162) writes in regard to Sathya Sai Baba that:

the strict facts of his personal biography and manner of life are buried beneath layer upon layer of hagiography... no objective account of Sathya Sai Baba’s life has been written by anyone close to him. Indeed, such an account may be an inherent impos-

⁴⁰ Sathya Sai Baba (10-1949) LIMF 485

⁴¹ DI 75-76

⁴² On Kasturi, see his autobiography, *Loving God* (1985), and Gangā Rām Garg (1987), Vol. 4, p.71.

⁴³ Many devotees, at least, do find Kasturi’s work intellectually demanding (not to be read without a dictionary close at hand), and whilst Kasturi is far from critical of his sources, I do not think that he has much exaggerated their claims—the exaggeration, if any, rests with them, and (as we will see) with Sathya Sai Baba himself.

sibility; it is unlikely that anyone who is allowed into his inner circles would *want* to write in such a vein... thus Sathya Sai Baba himself cannot be the actual subject of an account of his cult.... no supposedly 'real' Sathya Sai Baba can be any more real than an imagined character in fiction.

Again, however, he must stand partly corrected—in the year 2000, after seven years of research, R. Padmanaban, who was Baba's personal photographer from 1985 to 1990, published a thoroughly documented 600 page chronological account of Sathya Sai Baba's first twenty-four years of life, drawing upon every conceivable primary source. At his behest, many parts of Sathya Sai Baba's Telugu works were specially retranslated into English, and almost 200 interviews were conducted with people who knew Sathya Sai Baba in his youth. This enormous book, entitled *Love is My Form: The Advent*, is only the first of several projected volumes documenting the whole of Sathya Sai Baba's life decade by decade. If completed, these will provide an account of Sathya Sai Baba's life as detailed as would be possible to produce for almost any person of his era.

This is at odds with what Jeffrey Kripal (2001:396)⁴⁴ notes to be 'three basic phases' that are usually apparent in Indian hagiographical traditions:

(1) the earliest hagiographies... display a clear and overriding concern for getting the "facts" straight about the life (bios), often in the process struggling openly with difficult psychological issues...; (2) a stage of skepticism and reassessment, which challenges the earlier (and often more nuanced) conclusions of the earliest hagiographies, balancing all the while the needs for both an accurate bios and an inspiring and developing mythos; and (3) a mythicization phase, in which the processes of mythos clearly take precedence over a reconstruction of the bios. In this final phase, no further historical research into the life is attempted; instead, the hagiographers rely on the previous lives to construct an increasingly elaborate and grand vision of the saint.

Of course, *Love is My Form* does very much have a devotional flavour to it, and Padmanaban (2000:571) indicates that he has indeed attempted therein to weld previous materials into a 'grand drama', 'to glean, from endless myths and legends, the real gems that sparkle in the 'being' of Baba'. But he does not seek to hide some of the inconsistencies in the information that his research uncovered, often being content to give variant accounts of dates and events—albeit sometimes rationalizing these as being due to the fact that:

Indian spirituality tends to discourage numerous debates on scholarly details relating to time and space, for it is concerned with a realm which is beyond time and space. Sri Sathya Sai Baba also disapproves of such debates. ...he apparently 'confuses'

⁴⁴ NB Kripal is here representing (in the process of reviewing) the views of Robin Rinehart (1999).

people with his utterances—with seemingly different and conflicting dates and names. This may be his way of discouraging such futile pursuits [p.149].

Unlike previous biographers, Padmanaban (2000:572) even seems to have attempted—albeit unsuccessfully—to portray, at least in his style of writing, a somewhat detached attitude to the issue of Sathya Sai Baba’s divinity:

while composing the text (on Baba’s life immediately following the Declaration that He was an Incarnation of Divinity), the computer started registering pronouns relating to Baba—only in the upper case—although we tried, in many ways, to undermine it!

At least Padmanaban was able to use lower case letters for the earlier parts of Sathya Sai Baba’s life—the most striking thing about most of Sathya Sai Baba’s other biographies is, as Babb (1987:171) notes, that ‘Sathya Sai Baba’s divine persona is not treated in developmental terms’. The authors of these works seem to have implicitly accepted some of Sathya Sai Baba’s own proclamations on the issue—that he possessed full awareness of his Divinity⁴⁵ and all of his divine powers⁴⁶ from even before his physical birth. *Love is My Form*, and other recent biographical works, however, do portray more of a sense of development, and thus do perhaps provide us with some genuine insight into the “real” Sathya Sai Baba.

Babb (1987:173-174) elsewhere elaborates upon the “layers of hagiography” that supposedly obscure this “real” Sathya Sai Baba:

His childhood was not a particular childhood but *the* childhood of a juvenile god, for which the ruling paradigm in India is the early life of Krishna. ...the image of the magical child is superseded by another—that of the archetypal holy man, as represented by Sai Baba of Shirdi. ...this identity, in turn, is encompassed within yet another, which is not only wider, but universal. Now he is revealed to be Shiva and Shakti, who together represent the Absolute.

I will explicate the details of this in due course, but I would note here that, in some cases at least, the facts of this matter seem to be the other way around—Sathya Sai Baba refers to various biological accidents and biographical incidents in his life (and also that of Shirdi Sai Baba, of whom I will have much to say in the next chapter) as constitutive of a paradigm for avatars. For example, he was born in the Telugu month of Akshaya, but states that ‘Divinity always incarnates in the year Akshaya only’⁴⁷. He has a prominent mole on his cheek, and Shirdi Sai Baba is reported to have had ‘a very big mole on his shoulder’ (something which was

⁴⁵ C 113 NB Adigalar (see pp.356ff), another modern avatar figure, says similar things.

⁴⁶ Sathyam-3 (8) 126

⁴⁷ (20-3-2007) [morning] <http://www.sathyasai.org/discour/2007/do7o32o.html> [19-4-2007]

believed by his followers to emphasize his ‘extraordinary nature’⁴⁸), but he says of Kṛṣṇa too: ‘On his bare chest, there was a mole which could be clearly seen, an inevitable mark of all *Avathaars*, including the Sais’⁴⁹. Similarly, he claims that, like Shirdi Sai Baba, he will often ‘take on’ an illness that one of his devotees would have otherwise had to suffer⁵⁰, and whilst, as we will see (p.277), such behaviour is typical of practitioners of ecstatic religion, he adds that: ‘All avatars have taken on illness. These things are not recorded’⁵¹ (as indeed, in traditional accounts of the avatars, they are not).

Moreover, even when some of these alignments of himself with earlier avatars *do* tally with some of the details traditionally ascribed to these figures, this does not, necessarily, mean that such details misrepresent the facts in his own case⁵². Thus, he portrays an independently attested to period of withdrawal and introspection in his early life as characteristic of ‘all *Avathaars*’ (Rāma, at least, is traditionally believed to have gone through such a period—see p.249). Or he belittles those who imitate his style and dress⁵³, pointing out that Kṛṣṇa too had such an imitator (he did, see p.183). Or he asks:

Have you ever seen a picture of Rama or Krishna sporting grey hair? Have you ever seen a picture of Krishna with signs of old age? Have you ever seen Him as a grandfather? All *avatars* are ever youthful.⁵⁴

And he connects this with his own remarkably youthful features. He even refers to one of Kṛṣṇa’s famous morally ambiguous stratagems, averring that: ‘All *Avatars* employ such techniques, and Swami too does the same when required’⁵⁵.

There thus is a sense in which, even in consulting hagiographical accounts, we do encounter something of the “real” Sathya Sai Baba. Nevertheless, over and above what we have just seen, and beyond what Padmanaban has done (or plans to do), it is unlikely that I can uncover much more material that might be illuminating in this respect. Padmanaban’s research was extremely thorough, and whilst

⁴⁸ Rigopoulos (1993), p.101.

⁴⁹ Sathya Sai Baba (6-9-1963) S3 21:124 NB He elsewhere identifies such a ‘mole’ with the ‘Sri-vathsa’—one of the traditional insignia of Viṣṇu. See Sathya Sai Baba (28-8-1994) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume27/sss27-23.pdf> [19-4-2007], cf., e.g., *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 10:3.9.

⁵⁰ (6-7-1963) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume03/sss03-15.pdf> [12-7-2007]

⁵¹ (27-7-2002) <http://sairam19.tripod.com/isc/usa.htm> [19-4-2007]

⁵² NB In terms that we will see some scholars to have used in explicating traditional Indian religion, these may be “connections through resemblance”, not “transpositions from myth” (see p.185).

⁵³ For a list of Sai imitators see <http://saicopycats.blogspot.com/> [21-7-2006].

⁵⁴ <http://www.sathyasai.org/discour/2002/do20517.html> [19-4-2007] Cf. Prabhupāda (1982:210).

⁵⁵ Sathya Sai Baba (18-5-2000) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/dooo518.html> [19-4-2007]

I should note, for those who might be interested, that he most likely has some interesting unpublished material in his archives, I am not in a position to access this.

In any case, as Babb (1986:162) goes on to write:

the humanly real Sathya Sai Baba is not of greatest interest.... the most interesting Sathya Sai Baba, and in a sense the most real too, is the one who is worshipped by his devotees. This Sathya Sai Baba is what is known as an avatār, a ‘descent’ of God to earth... At this level, the extravagances of hagiography are not an impediment, but an important aid to discovery.

I would add that, as I asserted to be the case with Sathya Sai Baba’s speeches, there is an important sense in which these “extravagances of hagiography” are approved of, and often even instigated by, Sathya Sai Baba himself.

In fact, as Padmanaban (2000:199) writes:

Baba’s teacher at Bukkapatnam School, V.C.Kondappa, wrote the first book in Telugu on Sri Sathya Sai Baba, entitled *Sri Sayeeshuni Charitra* (1944).... Baba asked him to stay up alone one night at Puttaparthi and had narrated the life story of the first 16 years of Shirdi Sai, as well as details of His own life.... N.Kasturi mentions that he... had leant heavily on material in this book for his biography *Sathyam Sivam Sundaram*.

Sathya Sai Baba himself is thus a major source of the material that has found its way into his official biography (upon which most other accounts draw) and we will see that he has much supplemented this fund of material by narrating autobiographical (or, more often, “autohagiographical”) anecdotes in his speeches. This, as we will see, is quite unusual—more commonly, it is devotees who foist hagiographical extravagances upon their characteristically reticent masters. The “most real” Sathya Sai Baba is thus even more “real” (at least in psychological terms) than Babb imagines.

There is, then, some reasonably “objective” basis for my investigation, and we saw earlier in this section, my topic does seem to be of some genuine objective importance (in a cross-cultural societal sense, if not at a universal level) over and above its obvious subjective importance to me. The suggestion that I noted from Gerson seems valid in this instance, and from Sathya Sai Baba’s non-dualistic perspective too, after the philosophical line quoted at the head of this section (another sort of “oriental objectivity”) this is perhaps only as it should be. Moreover, as we will see in the next section, Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar persona is of further “objective” import in that it is intertwined with a number of major scandals that have recently drawn worldwide attention to him.

1.2 Indecent Descent?

Unfortunately, even when the Formless Absolute assumes a form, there are persons, who impelled by their own attitudes, attribute their own human foibles to the *Avatar*.¹

One of the first things that Sathya Sai Baba said in my first interview with him was: ‘Boys are being paid to say bad things about Swami’ (pointing at myself and another twenty-something year old devotee). At the time, I had little idea what he was talking about. Living an insulated life at the ashram, I was unaware of the allegations of sexual abuse against Sathya Sai Baba that were making headlines in the outside world. In September 2000, the Organisation had suffered a major setback when UNESCO withdrew at the last minute from an International Conference hosted at Puttaparthi on ‘Strengthening Values Education’²—due to a recent bout of allegations on the internet³ against Sathya Sai Baba of paedophilia and sexual abuse⁴. Such allegations are nothing new, first surfacing in the 1970s, but it seems that they are now beginning to be taken seriously. The US State Department recently published an official warning that all young male travellers to Andhra Pradesh ought to beware of ‘a prominent local religious leader’⁵, and a motion was put before parliament in the UK to warn all British citizens against going to see Sathya Sai Baba⁶. Such responses are largely due to the efforts of ‘concerned former devotees of Sathya Sai Baba’ who have put up a number of websites seeking to inform devotees and the general public of what they consider to be Sathya Sai Baba’s many misdemeanours.

All of this makes Sathya Sai Baba a topical and controversial figure, and this provides further justification for my decision to focus upon him—all the more since, as the quotation at top here indicates, he sometimes invokes his religious persona in defending himself from such criticisms. In this instance, he refers to his self-proclaimed identity as “the avatar”, and his critics too, have sometimes framed

¹ Sathya Sai Baba (24-3-1991) S24 6:55

² See: http://www.unescobkk.org/Media_Advisory.htm [15-09-2000] NB As Eleanor Nesbitt and Ann Henderson (2003:85) note, such ‘adverse publicity about Sathya Sai Baba’ similarly resulted in the postponement in 2001 of a Sathya Sai Education in Human Values training course in the UK. Since, as intimated earlier, education programmes of this type are central to Sathya Sai Baba’s global mission, setbacks of this kind are a serious problem for his organization.

³ On this see <http://www.saiguru.net/english/articles/o2ssbinternet.htm> [19-2-2006]

⁴ For other examples (ex-devotee viewpoints) see: <http://www.saiguru.net/english/articles/o2guruaccused.htm> [19-2-2006]; <http://home.no.net/anir/Sai/enigma/SaiSex.htm> [29-7-2006].

⁵ See, e.g., <http://home.hetnet.nl/~ex-baba/engels/letters/glendoreen.html> [3-8-2006]

⁶ See, e.g., <http://home.hetnet.nl/~ex-baba/engels/shortnews/motion886.html> [3-8-2006]

their attacks in religious terms. He has been strongly denounced by some Christian individuals and groups, even being cast in the roles of Devil⁷ and Antichrist (see p.32 above). In the mid 1970's an American Sai-devotee by the name of Tal Brooke became disillusioned with Sathya Sai Baba and converted to Christianity, writing a series of books about his former *guru* with titles such as *Lord of the Air* (titled after a biblical epithet of Satan) and *Avatar of Night*⁸.

Behind this are Christian beliefs in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the one and only Incarnation of the one and only God (who “tolerates no rivals”). These present an obvious conflict with Sathya Sai Baba’s claims to be “the avatar”. Animosity arising from such beliefs is nothing new—Geoffrey Parrinder (1970:13), author of a comparative study of Hindu avatar and Christian Incarnational ideas, cites an observation by Aldous Huxley that:

because Christians believed that there had been only one Avatar [i.e. The Incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ], Christian history has been disgraced by more and bloodier crusades... than has the history of Hinduism and Buddhism.

Whilst, as Parrinder goes on to say, the particulars of this assertion ‘can be criticized on grounds of theology and history’, he notes that ‘other people have said much the same [as Huxley]’, and it is not without some justification that a general (fundamentalist) Christian tendency to (verbally) attack other religious traditions may be identified today⁹.

Brooke was the first person to call attention to alleged sexual encounters between Sathya Sai Baba and young male devotees, and it might be tempting to see this as a reflection of a general (fundamentalist) Christian antagonism towards homosexuality. But such stories cannot be easily dismissed as fabrications, for similar (and worse) accusations have since been made against Sathya Sai Baba by (in addition to Christian detractors¹⁰) secular skeptics and even academics. In ad-

⁷ See, e.g., <http://www.saiguru.net/english/articles/o2guruaccused.htm> [19–2–2006]

⁸ See, e.g., R. T. Brooke, *Lord of the Air* (Berkhamsted, Lion Publishing, 1976) [*Avatar of Night* is a revision of this work]. NB On Tal Brooke see also Howard Levin (1995), pp.147ff. (*et passim*).

⁹ On contemporary Christian anti-cult ideas, see Douglas Cowan, *Bearing false witness: propaganda, reality-maintenance, and Christian anticult apologetics* (Calgary, University of Calgary, 1999).

¹⁰ Pro-Sai activist Gerald Moreno documents further Christian opposition to Sathya Sai Baba (<http://www.saisathyasai.com/baba/Ex-Baba.com/christian-atheist-anti-sai-movements.html> [27-7-2006]). NB Moreno, though he disavows affiliation with Sathya Sai Baba does have a generally favourable disposition to him and other Indian *gurus*. He writes: ‘I was a devotee from the age of 18 to the age of 25. I had/have basic philosophical differences of opinion, with several aspects to SSB’s teachings (in particular, God Concepts & Karma), and I left the Sai Movement for that reason. Nevertheless, I have had many beautiful, powerful and spiritual experiences with SSB, as I have had with many other spiritual personalities’ (<http://www.saisathyasai.com/baba/Ex-Baba.com/faq.html> [14-7-

dition to sexual abuse, Sathya Sai Baba is associated with false propaganda and misuse of finances in some of his community service and educational projects¹¹, and medical malpractice and organ-theft in his charitable hospitals¹². There are even some claims that he was party to an alleged execution by police of a group of four would-be-assassins (former Sai-students) who fought their way into his bedroom in 1993—killing two of his personal attendants in the process¹³.

There is no space for me to go into much detail—the curious will find no dearth of such on the internet¹⁴—but I will digress a little to discuss some of the issues here. Hugh Urban (2003b:248), one of the few academics writing on Sathya Sai Baba today, cites a case that presents a potential parallel to my situation:

a number of respected South Asianists and historians of religions have become devoted members of the Siddha Yoga movement. In 1997, several of them collaborated to publish a major volume on Siddha theology and practice.... Yet any reader of this text is immediately struck by its rather incredible omissions and silences... [in respect to] the intense controversy and scandal surrounding Siddha Yoga.

As a scholar and a devotee, I ought at least to say something of the controversies surrounding Sathya Sai Baba. Some of them, in any case, intersect with my chosen focus upon his religious persona¹⁵. And, for what it is worth, I can give my informed opinion that, whilst they sometimes seem to raise genuine concerns, they are certainly not as straightforward as most of his detractors make out.

2006]). Nevertheless, when he began his enquiries into the allegations of sexual-abuse against Sathya Sai Baba, he did so believing them to be true, but overstated by Sathya Sai Baba's critics. He now believes them to be false, and, if the recent appearance of his other major websites <http://www.vishwarupa.com> and <http://www.sai-fi.net> are anything to go by, he is well on his way to becoming a Sai-devotee once more.

¹¹ See, e.g., <http://home.hetnet.nl/~ex-baba/engels/shortnews/conclusions.html> [3-8-2006]

¹² http://home.hetnet.nl/~ex_baba/engels/articles/p_holbach/eng/kidn_e.htm [30-7-2006]

¹³ See, e.g., <http://home.no.net/anir/Sai/MurderReview.htm> [3-8-2006]

¹⁴ Gerald Moreno gives a good list of pro-Sai websites at: http://www.sai-fi.net/baba/controversy_allegations/ [3-8-2006], and Exbaba.com gives a comprehensive list of anti-Sai websites at: <http://home.hetnet.nl/~ex-baba/engels/links.html> [3-8-2006]. NB Of the few published books that might be thought relevant here, I would note that Hugh Urban (2003a:74) sees an excessively 'caustic critique' in some of the would-be-scholarly sceptical criticisms of Sathya Sai Baba's 'miracles', and I would note something similar in the work of "independent researcher" Kevin Shepherd (2005:269ff.), who decries Sathya Sai Baba as, for example, a 'heartless paedophile', 'the embodiment of constant lies', and dismisses some typical Hindu exoteric ritual events in his cult as 'ignoble' and 'repulsive'. Shepherd (2005:viii, 4) even goes to the extent of excoriating SUNY Press for publishing a book on Shirdi Sai Baba that portrays Sathya Sai Baba's comments on this figure as 'informative', and whose author sought Sathya Sai Baba's blessings.

¹⁵ A number of sexual abuse accusations against Sathya Sai Baba are entwined with claims that "he" is anatomically androgynous, and this, as internet activist and ex-Sathya Sai Baba devotee Alexandra Nagel notes, is sometimes explicitly connected by him with traditional Hindu mythological ideas, some of which have strong erotic connotations. I will say more on this later (see pp.278ff.).

The last of the above-listed allegations is a case in point. It is perhaps the most serious of the charges against Sathya Sai Baba—but, when taken in context, proves to be less extraordinary than might otherwise seem to be the case. ‘Police killings’ were evidently not uncommon in Andhra Pradesh at the time of the incident in question. Patricia Gossman (1992:1-3) of ‘Human Rights Watch’ writes that ‘security forces have murdered hundreds of peasants and tribal villagers’:

the victims have first been detained in police custody and then subsequently reported by the authorities as having been killed in an encounter with the security forces. In almost all such reported “encounters”, the detainees have actually been murdered by the police. Security legislation has increased the likelihood of such abuses by authorizing the security forces to shoot to kill and by protecting them from prosecution for human rights violations.

This would fit some descriptions of the events at Sathya Sai Baba’s ashram, which describe how the suspects were first detained (by Sathya Sai Baba’s followers), then executed under cover of the claim that police were acting in self-defence¹⁶.

Also problematic are claims that many “miracles” attributed to Sathya Sai Baba (running the gamut from “resurrection of the dead” to “materialization” of Swiss watches) are simple fakes. Dale Beyerstein (1994)—a prominent academic skeptic with whom anti-Sai internet activists have aligned themselves—collects some typical ‘claims made about Sai Baba’s psychic powers’ (by Sathya Sai Baba and others), and gives a good common-sense summary and analysis of these, concluding:

“extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof”. The proponents of Sai Baba simply have not met this standard. ...I have examined the best evidence put forward, and found it unconvincing. ...my magician colleagues have pointed out visible evidence of sleight of hand passed off as genuine paranormal power.

This is indeed, if argument-by-adage is in order, “evidence of absence”, rather than mere “absence of evidence”, but—as Beyerstein himself acknowledges—it does not amount to proof.

Unfortunately, the type of evidence that would constitute proof—clinical data on Sathya Sai Baba’s purported powers—is unlikely to be forthcoming. Beginning in 1972, two prominent parapsychologists, Erlendur Haraldsson and Karlis Osis undertook almost a dozen in-depth investigations of Sathya Sai Baba’s ‘miracles’ over the course of a decade¹⁷. Haraldsson (1997:222,39) writes: ‘in spite of a lon-

¹⁶ Cf. <http://home.hetnet.nl/%7Eexbaba/engels/articles/whommurdered.html#7.%20Who%20Murdered%20the%20Four%20alleged%20Assailants?> [3-8-2006]

¹⁷ Haraldsson (1997), p.65. NB For more references, see pp.416ff. below. Beyerstein’s account, cited above, is similarly of note in this regard, and Jeffrey Goldman (1996) also apparently discusses

glasting and painstaking effort, we found no direct evidence of fraud'. But Sathya Sai Baba refused to permit them to conduct clinical tests—citing moral constraints:

He explained that a prime minister has great powers. Under some circumstances he can order the arrest of people, but he cannot do that just to demonstrate his power. It is the same with him. He cannot use his power for demonstrations.

Interestingly, Sathya Sai Baba's religious persona comes to the fore in this—it is implicit here, but in one of his speeches, he makes this explicit: 'An Avatar will undertake to demonstrate such powers when exceptional circumstances demand it, and will shed the grace on a deserving person only'¹⁸.

But Sathya Sai Baba's attitude to his "miracles" is somewhat inconsistent. On occasion, he presents them as genuine and as revelations of his divine identity:

this is evidence of My Divinity. All performances of magic, as you know, are done for the sake of income. These are tricks of the magician's trade. They constitute a kind of legalized cheating, the transfer of an object from one place to another by a trick of the hand which goes unnoticed.... What I do is quite a different act of creation.... For one thing, I seek no return. For another, I do not cheat people by transferring objects, but I create them.... For me this is a kind of visiting card to convince people of My love for them and secure their devotion in return. Since love is formless, I use materialization as evidence of My love [(8-1976) GLI 12].

He thus patently denies using prestidigitation and explicitly states his miracles to be 'evidence' of his 'Divinity'. At other times, however, he promotes the opposite viewpoint: 'So-called 'miracles' are not miracles, nor do they prove divinity'¹⁹.

Babb (1986:178) does not seem to have picked up on this when he writes: 'On one point let there be no mistake: miracles are crucial and central to the cult of Sathya Sai Baba'. He cites only the former of these statements and another similar one, but the latter also, is not an isolated case—Sathya Sai Baba elsewhere says:

People may be very near (physically) to the *Avathaar*... but, they live out their lives unaware of their fortune; they exaggerate the role of miracles, which are as trivial, when compared to My glory and majesty, as a mosquito is in size and strength to the elephant upon which it squats.²⁰

And such a view better accords with general academic understandings of the role of miracles in religious leadership, for June McDaniel (1989:262), referring to

Sathya Sai Baba's miracles in a section of his MA thesis—but I was unable to procure a copy of this. See also my own article: 'Visiting-Cards Revisited: An account of some recent first-hand observations of the 'miracles' of Sathya Sai Baba, and an investigation into the role of the miraculous in his theology' *Journal of Religion and Psychical Research* 26, October 2003, pp.198ff.

¹⁸ SSB (6) 77 (1976) [p.113 in the online version].

¹⁹ C (1968-78) XXI 66

²⁰ Sathya Sai Baba (9-6-1974) S12 38:227

Charles Keyes (1982:4), writes that ‘the miracle is a secondary rather than a primary sign of charisma; it serves to validate and support a religious role, but cannot initiate it’. More specifically, McDaniel (1989:262) goes on to conclude from her study of a number of Hindu religious leaders that: ‘Miracles were one proof of avatar status, but they were not required’.

And, rather than miracles, the central issue in all of the three statements of Sathya Sai Baba that I have just quoted, seems to be his religious role—his ‘divinity’, his identity as ‘the *Avathaar*’. He goes on from his claim that his ‘miracles’ are ‘not miracles’ and do not ‘prove Divinity’ to state that: ‘Baba’s endless work in all the worlds—easy, no weight, always happy—that is the ‘miracle’, and this recalls traditional descriptions of the idea of the *līlā*, the “play”, of the avatars. Freda Matchett (2005:174,173), in a recent study that touches upon traditional representations of this phenomenon writes that: ‘*līlā* is to be seen not so much as one possible purpose of the Lord’s *avatāras*²¹ as a quality which inheres in the *avatāras* and in their actions, whatever their purpose may be’; ‘Even removing the earth’s burden²² is not a hard task... it is something which can be done *līlayā* (either ‘in play’ or ‘with ease’). In any case, the most prominent genres of miracles associated with Sathya Sai Baba are themselves evocative of his divine persona.

By far the most common magical power attributed to Sathya Sai Baba is an ability to materialize sacred ash, known as *vibhūti*, which he regularly distributes to his followers as a panacea. The very name *vibhūti* is identical to a generic term for magical “powers” as given in some traditional works²³; there is an important sense in which the supposedly magical origin of this substance is implicit in its name. But, as Daniel Bassuk (1987b:101), writing on avatars in general, states:

Vibhuti is related to Vishnu’s universal power, for in the *Mahabharata* Vishnu [“the “pervading” deity (see p.182)] is often called Vibhu, a reference to his imperishable source of existence. The substantive form of *Vibhu* is *Vibhuti*.

Since, as we will see, Viṣṇu is the deity most strongly traditionally associated with the avatars, Sathya Sai Baba’s production of *vibhūti* can be taken, as Bassuk interprets it, as an element of his avatar identity. David Bowen (1985:268), surveying traditional symbolic associations of *vibhūti*, concludes that: ‘The various elements in the connotation of the term *vibhuti* ...suggest a focus on the empirical articulation of divine glory and power’. Some of Sathya Sai Baba’s own views affirm

²¹ Cf. p.68 below.

²² See p.136 below.

²³ See, e.g., “Vyāsa’s” *Yoga-bhāṣya* on *Yoga-sūtra* 3:55.

this—he portrays the “materialisation” of *vibhūti*, both in his physical presence²⁴ and upon pictures of him at remote distances²⁵, as evidence of his Divinity: ‘In order to make known My majesty and My glory as the Divine that has Incarnated, miraculous happenings of an amazing nature do take place in certain areas’²⁶.

Similar to Sathya Sai Baba’s representations of the symbolism of *vibhūti*, are his descriptions of the significance of his regular “materializations” of ovoid idols known as *līngams* (“signs”). Swallow (1982:146-147) describes Sathya Sai Baba’s supposedly magical production of these (preceded by his producing large quantities of *vibhūti*) at the annual ‘Mahāśivarātri Festival’²⁷:

He joins the singing until his voice breaks and he appears to be undergoing great physical distress. After some minutes he regurgitates a small *lingam* which devotees believe has formed inside his body.

And Sathya Sai Baba, invoking folk-etymology, states that:

Lingam means, that in which this *jagath* (world of change) attains *laya* (mergence or dissolution), *Leeyathe*. All Forms merge in the Formless at last. Shiva is the Principle of the Destruction of all Names and Forms, of all entities and individuals. So, the *Linga* is the simplest sign of emergence and mergence [(2-1969) S9 3:14].

This tallies with his above-cited description of the significance of *vibhūti*.

As indicated here, *līngams* are especially associated with the deity Śiva, but, Sathya Sai Baba makes a point of noting some association also with Viṣṇu, the deity who, as mentioned above, is more often associated with avatars:

the Sivalinga installed by Sri Rama in Ramesvaram, a pilgrim centre in Tamilnadu [Fig.3a]. Rama, being Vishnu Himself, proved that He and Siva are basically one and the same by installing a Sivalinga [SO1 2:6.125].

Sathya Sai Baba also explicitly presents his production of *līngams* as ‘an announcement of the advent of the *Avatar*’, describing these objects as ‘the *Swa-swaruupa* (the real Form of the Reality)’²⁸. There may be influences from folk-religion here, for Günther-Dietz Sontheimer (1997:315-316), surveying ‘some

²⁴ E.g. R.K.Karangia, *God Lives in India* (Prashanthi Nilayam, Sai Towers, 1997), p.12.

²⁵ NB As Babb (1986:180) notes, “remote materializations” play an important role in Sathya Sai Baba’s cult, in that they ‘contribute to its remarkable ability to sustain its energy despite the physical remoteness of its presiding deity’ and, in light of Sathya Sai Baba’s statement here, we may here confirm Babb’s hypothesis that ‘Sathya Sai Baba does not disclaim association’ with such events.

²⁶ Sathya Sai Baba (22-11-1970) S10 35:234

²⁷ NB Haraldsson (1997:248,n1) notes that: ‘A swami in Sri Lanka, Swami Premananda, has also performed this feat during the Shivaratri festival’, and he cites C.T.K.Chari (1973) on this. More recently, Sri of Kaleshwar of Penukonda has performed this feat (<http://alxindia.blogspot.com/2004/11/miracle-of-miracles-atma-lingams.html> [20-3-2008]).

²⁸ Sathya Sai Baba (26-2-1968) S8 8:34

terms which are ubiquitous in the practice of Maharashtrian folk cults and which also have their equivalents in other regions and languages’, writes of the ‘*svayambhū* [self-born²⁹] *liṅg*’, through which ‘the [folk] god shows himself (*svārūpa*) for the first time spontaneously, to his devotee... in the form of a stone’. I will further discuss the symbolism of the *liṅgam* at a later stage (p.167 below); for now, it is enough to note that Sathya Sai Baba links it to his avatar persona.

Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar persona, then, is clearly of paramount importance to him, and this emphasis is generally reflected in the views of his devotees and detractors. Haraldsson (1997:210) writes of a controversy that flared in the Indian press in 1976 after Sathya Sai Baba refused to submit to a proposed clinical testing of his miracles (by Indian academic sceptics) that: ‘The controversy was not only about whether Baba can really perform miracles. For many people the more appropriate question was, is he God?’ And Smriti Srinivas (2001:303) similarly notes that Sathya Sai Baba’s popularity ‘has as much to do with the construction of Baba as a cosmic avatar with a world mission as with that of an accessible magus’.

Specifically, in this last regard, I would point out that, each year, ‘Avatar Declaration Day’—said to be the anniversary of Sathya Sai Baba’s first proclamation of his divine identity³⁰—is commemorated at his ashram³¹, and one only need consult the official website of the international Sathya Sai Baba Organization to see that, of the hundreds of discourses that Sathya Sai Baba has given, four in which he most strongly proclaims his divine identity are given special prominence³². Moreover, Babb (1986:183), who we saw proclaiming the paramount importance of Sathya Sai Baba’s miracles, himself acknowledges that:

it is possible to ‘believe’ in the miracles without believing in Sathya Sai Baba. ...What is most important is not belief *in* the miracles, but what devotees come to believe *about* the miracles.... The very first thing that must be understood about Sathya Sai Baba is that he is, in every sense that matters, a deity to his devotees.

And it is not merely ‘to his devotees’ that Sathya Sai Baba is a deity—this would apply to most modern Hindu *gurus*. As Babb (1986:166) further points out, what is unusual about him, is that his ‘assertion of divine status is expressed in the first

²⁹ NB Despite Sontheimer’s assertions of the folk status of these ideas, they echo vedic views. Gonda (1965:147) writes that: ‘According to RV. 10,121 the anonymous primeval Being became a golden germ, which was deposited in the waters which produced the first god; according to Manu 1,9 this seed became a golden egg, in which the Self-existent was born as Brahmā the creator’.

³⁰ See p.288 below.

³¹ See http://www.srisathyasai.org.in/Pages/AshramInfo/Avatar_Declaration_Day.htm [11-3-2007]

³² See <http://www.sathyasai.org/discour/content.htm> [11-3-2007]

person; he states it boldly and repeatedly'³³.

This choice of words is unfortunate, for Sathya Sai Baba often, also, as we will see, refers to himself in this regard in the third person, but Babb's general point holds good, and Marvin Harper (1972:90), one of the first academics to write about Sathya Sai Baba, similarly emphasizes this, noting that:

Without any apparent sense of either embarrassment or of boasting, Sathya Sai says and writes much about himself:

When someone asks you, in great earnestness, where the Lord is to be found, do not try to dodge the question. Give him the answer that rises up to your tongue from your heart. Direct them to come to Puttaparthi and share your joy! Tell them He is here in the Prasanthi Nilayam.

Here, the biblical epithet 'the Lord' presumably translates the Sanskrit term '*Bhagavān*', which Babb (1986:166) suggests rendering as 'simply, 'God'', and, whilst this is a common form of address for many Hindu gurus, Sathya Sai Baba is clearly using it in an exclusivist manner—the definite article is entirely appropriate. Agehananda Bharati (1986:723), reviewing Babb's work, also highlights this:

Sai Baba comes out up front—he is Shiva and Shakti in one, not metaphorically, not metonymically. This is strong medicine, even in this day and age when there is a surfeit of minor and major incarnations roaming the land.

The Hindu deities Śiva and Śakti personify the masculine and feminine aspects of the Deity respectively, and together, as Babb (1987:173) notes, they 'represent the Absolute'. Thus, whilst, as Bharati hints, many Hindu gurus are viewed by their followers as incarnations (i.e. avatars) of either one of these (or other) deities, Sathya Sai Baba's claim to incarnate both of them is a strong one.

Indeed, whilst Parrinder (1970:20) states that 'any unusual appearance or distinguished person could be called an avatar, and often is today in the language of respect, though this diminishes the original theological purpose of the term', this cannot apply to Sathya Sai Baba's case, for he is himself claiming this identity, and there is little diminishment of 'theological purpose'. Babb (1987:174) writes:

In his identity as Shiva and Shakti, Sathya Sai Baba's persona opens out into transcendental inclusiveness and ambiguity. He is beyond all limiting categories. All times and all space are one to him. His character also transcends gender, for he is male and female in one body. By his own interpretation, Sai means "divine mother"

³³ Cf., e.g., the example of South-Indian *guru* Pandurangashram Swami (d.1915) who, as Frank Conlon (1982:145) writes: 'To many of the faithful... was an *avatāra* (manifestation) of the deity', but 'never claimed special roles or powers'. Similarly, to give another, more prominent, example, Christopher Fuller (1992:175) notes that in the Swaminarayan order, 'the living guru... is perceived as divine, as an "abode of god"', yet, 'he does not claim this of his own accord'.

and Baba means “father.” He is the divine mother and father of all beings, blended in a single sacred personality.

In other words, the theology of transcendence that we identified earlier in some of Sathya Sai Baba’s ideas is embedded in his persona. Often, Sathya Sai Baba further portrays the avatar (i.e. implicitly and sometimes explicitly himself) as a provider of religious salvation. He says things like: ‘I must save every one of you; even if you say, nay, and move away, I shall do it’³⁴, or, using a modern simile:

The aeroplane has to land at certain places in order to take in those who have won the right to fly, by the tickets they have purchased. So too, the Lord has to come down so that those who have won the right to be liberated may be saved; incidentally, others too will know of the Lord, of His grace.... There are some who deny even today the possibility of air travel; they curse the contrivance.... Similarly, there are many who cavil at the *Avathaara* that has come to save [(5-2-1963) S3 4:30].

He clearly identifies with the avatar in its fullest theological, soteriological, sense.

Again, in the last passage here, the translator uses the definite article (both for ‘the Lord’ and ‘the *Avathaara*’), and Sathya Sai Baba himself often does the same when referring in English to himself or the major traditional avatars³⁵. Norris Palmer (2005:101), in one of the most recent scholarly articles on Sathya Sai Baba, highlights this when he writes that—to his devotees: ‘Sathya Sai Baba is not only understood to be a divine presence; he is *the* Divine Presence’. Palmer also cites Sathya Sai Baba’s official biography as testifying that ‘the universality of his claim extends far beyond the heavenly court of Hinduism: “...Rama, Krishna, Jesus, Allah, Sai.... All Names and Forms being His and His alone.” ...he is the deity of every religion’. But, as Palmer also notes: ‘As incarnate deity... his message heavily favors a Hindu outlook’. Indeed, a comment by Babb (1986:166) on the statement of Sathya Sai Baba just quoted by Palmer, indicates that, rather than any pluralistic ideal, traditional non-dualistic theology is at work here:

Because all the gods are ultimately one, Sathya Sai Baba is all the gods (and goddesses too) of the Hindu pantheon—and, indeed, in his view he is the deity of every religion.

Despite the fact that, as indicted by Babb and Bharati above, Sathya Sai Baba is most famous for his identification with Śiva and Śakti, he also, as we will see throughout this study, especially presents his sacred persona in terms of the Vaiṣṇava traditions (those “pertaining to the deity Viṣṇu”) that are more commonly associated with the idea of “the avatar”. Thus, whilst Babb (1983:117)

³⁴ Sathya Sai Baba (23-11-1961) S2 25:132

³⁵ See, e.g.: C XLIV 122 (1968-78)

characterizes Sathya Sai Baba is an ‘avatār (incarnation, descent) of Shiva’, later in the same article, he expounds a key feature of Sathya Sai Baba’s persona in terms of the above-mentioned doctrine of the *līlā* (“play”) of the gods—albeit that he does not comment upon its predominantly Vaiṣṇava pedigree.

Babb refers to David Kinsley (1979:5-6)—who does cite some Śaiva analogues to this doctrine in which the term *līlā* is sometimes used, but the dominant motifs in these are “dance” and/or “sport” (etc.) rather than the primarily Vaiṣṇava sense of the miraculous “prank’s” or “play” (of a child-deity) that Babb shows to resonate with Sathya Sai Baba’s persona. And indeed Babb (1987:179), in one of his several subsequent articles (which largely overlap—even with his first article), does draw out this connection, indicating that idea of *līlā* testifies to an important place for Kṛṣṇa (the most popular avatar of Viṣṇu) in Sathya Sai Baba’s persona:

Baba’s unpredictable, surprising, and often generous but sometimes mischievous acts are his play-as-display. Here is the youthful Krishna, Sathya Sai Baba the child-deity, still preserved as a fundamental part of his sacred demeanor.

The fact that Kṛṣṇa, regarded by many as the most recent of the traditional avatars, is supposed to have lived in a previous “epoch”, some five thousand years ago, gives another indication as to the extraordinary nature of Sathya Sai Baba’s claim. Whilst there is little, if any, historical evidence to support this far-flung traditional date, *ideas* of the avatar, as we will see, certainly date back many hundreds of years, and in so doing provide a vast fund of traditional material upon which Sathya Sai Baba is able to draw in aligning himself with them.

This is something that, as we have seen, he does with aplomb, and for significant purposes—including deflecting some of the criticisms of those who doubt his divinity or accuse him of wrongdoings. Indeed, he sometimes puts the very fact of the diverse history of traditional avatar accounts to this end:

Some time or other at some place or other, in some world or other, the inscrutable Divine incarnates... It takes a recognisable form which is related to the occasion, the time, the place and other circumstances determining Its advent. Do the idle gossip-mongers who indulge in atheistic propaganda make any earnest and sincere effort to find out the nature of the Divine? Without such effort how can the sacred character of the Divine be discovered? [(22-11-1980) S14 55:355-356]

Since, he (implicitly) argues, the Divine takes a great variety of forms, with each variation fitting a particular historical context, his own (perhaps unusual) form is of a kind with this variety and is merely a result of the Divine conforming itself, of necessity, to contemporary circumstances. He implies that, because of this variety,

and the complexities of circumstantial needs (time, place etc.), spiritual effort is necessary in order to understand that what might not appear to be sacred—the form, character, actions of the Divine (i.e. of himself)—is, on the contrary, so. And, in general, his devotees seem to have taken this type of reasoning on board, Palmer (2005:100) sees in Sathya Sai Baba apologetics ‘a consistent theme in response to those who disbelieve: If some human beings do not recognize his true nature, it is pitiable and due to their ignorance, blindness, or faithlessness’.

Like the idea of the avatar itself, this type of argument is nothing new. Parrinder (1970:122) suggests that a major function of traditional avatar concepts was to allow for ‘the inclusion of mythical beings of the past, and heroes of the present, within the same system’, and this is surely akin to what Sathya Sai Baba is doing above. Moreover, Parrinder (1970:38,46) observes that the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, one of the earliest traditions to focus on avatar-like ideas, holds that: ‘Critics of the incarnation of Krishna are ignorant of the divine nature that is behind it’; ‘critics of the Avatar are vain and ignorant, deluded by nature... except his devotees, for they adore him with resolution’. And this resonates with Sathya Sai Baba’s views. To give another example, Sathya Sai Baba states that:

Persons who cannot tolerate the Glory of the *Avathaar* have indulged in such campaigns, in every Age! ...Just as devotees remained unruffled in the Age of Krishna, you too must stand firm and be unaffected. ...do not lend your ears or mortgage your minds to purveyors of scandals or lies [(10-6-1974) S12 36:216,217].

And his line of reasoning has evidently had an effect upon (at least some of) his devotees, for Klass (1991:161) notes that: ‘Devotees express amusement at the charges against Sai Baba; they cite scriptural accounts of the rejection of [the two most prominent traditional avatars] *Rama* and *Krishna*’.

In a more direct sense also, Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar persona has evidently facilitated his sexual interactions with his devotees—Conny Larsson, a Swedish ex-devotee who was one of the first persons to claim to have been sexually abused by Sathya Sai Baba, even says: ‘Because he was God... I let it happen’³⁶. On the other hand, in the context of the sexual abuse claims, Sathya Sai Baba’s supporters proffer the idea that ‘SSB’s actions, no matter how sexual, cannot be equated with those of a normal human being’—the implication being that he should not be judged by ordinary (legal) standards³⁷. Indeed, in the quotation at the head of this

³⁶ <http://www.sokaren.se/INDEX135.HTML> [6-8-2005]

³⁷ <http://www.saisathyasai.com/baba/Ex-Baba.com/A-AlayaRahm/alaya-rahm-testimonies.html> [26-7-2006]

section, we saw that Sathya Sai Baba himself holds it inappropriate to project ‘human foibles’ onto ‘the Avatar’ (i.e. himself). Many of his devotees also utilize this type of reasoning in the context of the current controversies. Often, as Norris Palmer (2005:117) notes in a recent academic account of the effects of the recent controversies on Sathya Sai Baba’s devotees, they:

employ [either explicitly or implicitly] the Hindu concept of *lila*, or God’s play. *Lila* is invoked both to explain the alleged or apparent misdeeds of Baba and to maintain his perfection in the face of what can only be understood as the critic’s limited and naïve understanding of the real situation.

We encountered the traditional roots of this concept above—it has long been used to describe incongruous aspects of the behaviour of deities (especially avatars).

Similarly, specifically regarding the murder allegations, the NHNE *Special Report* notes that:

Baba Himself spoke of the murders in His Gurupoornima lecture and dealt with the question of whether the deaths of his near and dear were unavoidable. “Birth and death go together. One should realize that death is a natural phenomenon and avoid worrying about it... You must note that Swami’s life is in His own hands and not in those of anyone else. If I will it, I can live as long as I please. Because He is the almighty, God cannot behave in any arbitrary manner. Not realizing this truth, men who are involved in worldly ways ask questions as to why in certain situations, God did not use his limitless powers to avert certain untoward events...”³⁸

Whatever else this may mean, it is clear that Sathya Sai Baba is again invoking his (implicit) identity as ‘God’ in an attempt to dismiss suspicions about him (and any fears his devotees might have for his safety).

On top of this, it is significant that Sathya Sai Baba’s identity as ‘God’, or as “the avatar”, even when not invoked in such controversial contexts, looms large in the writings of both his supporters and his detractors. It is certainly a topic that both pro-Sai and anti-Sai factions see as important. Brian Steel, one of the more objective (and reserved) ex-devotees of Sathya Sai Baba, writes:

From the beginning of his Mission, it was SSB [Sathya Sai Baba] who assiduously attracted attention to himself and encouraged his devotees to talk about the special features he was promoting: his MIRACLES and his healing ability, his Avatarhood and Divine powers, his relationship with the legendary Hindu Avatars (Rama and Krishna).... Although there are other important aspects of SSB’s Mission (his teachings, the charitable work of his SSO [Sathya Sai Organization], for example), it is those same fascinating Divine topics (Avatar, Omnipotence, Omniscience) which devotees tend to hold uppermost in their minds when talking or writing about their

³⁸ <http://www.nhne.com/specialreports/srsaibaba.html> [19-7-2006]

guru.... Over the past 60 years of his spiritual Mission, SSB's claims of personal Divinity and Divine Attributes and Powers, uttered in his public Telugu Discourses and printed in a translated and edited form, have been numerous and unequivocal.³⁹

And other ex-devotees similarly, if usually more scathingly⁴⁰, give prominence to Sathya Sai Baba's avatar persona.

Most Sai-devotees, for their part, take Sathya Sai Baba's extraordinary claims at face value. Satya Pal Ruhela (1985:65), for example, portrays Sathya Sai Baba as:

the only authentic source for the exact dates, years, locales and the names of persons involved in innumerable pre-historic and historic events of the Indian legacy, by dint of his supernatural memory or omnipresence as an incarnation of God. ...he often informs us about the exact dates and other details about the Mahabharat war, Lord Krisna's birth and death, Christ's birth, crucifixion, [the] origin of man etc....

Unfortunately for Ruhela, Sathya Sai Baba's pronouncements in this regard are often inconsistent and/or inaccurate⁴¹, but it is not clear to me that Sathya Sai Baba ever intends to provide historically accurate information of this kind. As we will see, and as Beyerstein (1994) puts it, Sathya Sai Baba is generally 'far more interested in the moral of the story than the morality of telling the story inaccurately'⁴². This type of approach is common in traditional storytelling—as John Smith (1991:82) observes: 'Traditional history is not concerned with facts as such; it is concerned not with the *right* story, but with the *best* story'. Sathya Sai Baba himself has said similar things⁴³—if not quite going to the extent of admitting that he often simply makes up "historical" details—and the moral of a story (a value related concept by definition) is perhaps intrinsically more "important" than any specific historical details.

Still, as Ruhela's example illustrates, most Sathya Sai Baba devotees take Sathya Sai Baba's word to be infallible, and his divine identity as axiomatic. Sathya Sai Baba's discourses are presented in the official periodical of his movement as: 'Divine Discourse'; 'Avatar Vani'⁴⁴ ("Oration of the Avatar"); or at the very least—when the discourse is aimed at his students—'Gurudev Vani'⁴⁵ ("Speech of the Di-

³⁹ <http://bdsteel.tripod.com/More/doss2claims.htm> [12-4-2007].

⁴⁰ E.g., Robert Priddy writes of Sathya Sai Baba's claims in this context as being 'FOOD FOR SAI BABA FANATISM' [sic] (<http://home.chello.no/%7Ereirob/saibabamystery.htm> [29-7-2006]).

⁴¹ See, e.g.: Beyerstein (1994); <http://bdsteel.tripod.com/More/doss1stories.htm> [11-3-2007]; (or, with stronger anti-Sai rhetoric) <http://home.chello.no/%7Ereirob/Myth.htm> [29-7-2006].

⁴² http://www.exbaba.de/files/A_Critical_Study.html [5-3-2005]

⁴³ See, e.g.: pp.189,187; cf. p.173 below.

⁴⁴ E.g. San 42 (1) 1-1999, inside front cover and p.1 respectively.

⁴⁵ E.g. San 43 (9) 9-2000 p.266.

vine Guru”). Furthermore, Sathya Sai Baba’s official biography begins unambiguously in this regard: ‘This is the story of the Lord, come in human form’⁴⁶, and a number of subsequent publications reinforce this perception: *Sathya Sai Baba: God Incarnate; God Lives in India; Sai Baba: Avatar; Face to Face with God; The Lord Has Come; God Descends on Earth; The Advent of Sathya Sai; Living Divinity; The Sai Incarnation; Sathya Sai Baba God in Action; Message of the Lord; Divine Incarnation; Shri Sathya Sai: The Yugavatara*, etc.

Interestingly, whilst Sathya Sai Baba himself has certainly said much that would encourage such views, it is not true (as Steel claims) that Sathya Sai Baba’s proclamations in this regard are ‘unequivocal’. In fact, as Robert Priddy—like Steel an anti Sathya Sai Baba activist with a good grounding in objectivity⁴⁷—indicates, there is little that Sathya Sai Baba does say that can be taken unequivocally:

Sai Baba maintains his ‘mystery’ by avoiding giving straightforward answers:

From about 10 hours altogether in the various interview rooms with Sai Baba and from hearing and reading at least 100 accounts of interviews from other devotees (often noted in papers they circulate or in articles and books) and after countless hours of private discussion with Sai Baba’s translator at many interviews, V.K. Narasimhan, it is fair to say that Sai Baba seldom responds openly and frankly to what the questioner really wants to know, but turns the question back at the questioner or spins the matter around somehow. If he does reply (rather than, as often, turn to another person instead) what he says is frequently elliptical and off the point.⁴⁸

This certainly accords with my experience of Sathya Sai Baba—although, as I indicated in regard to some of my conversations with him that I cited earlier, he may have pedagogical aims in this. In fact he explicitly provides a rationale for something akin to this in his teachings, again invoking his avatar persona:

*Avatars seldom give advice directly. What they wish to convey, they give indirectly. The reason is: there is divinity present in each human being and it is by making man realise it that he should be enabled to correct himself. If the correctives are applied directly, man will never try to realise his divinity. The indirect method is used to give to man the capacity to understand his divinity.*⁴⁹

“Maintaining his mystery” does not seem to be Sathya Sai Baba’s priority here.

Priddy gives an example of Sathya Sai Baba deflecting a question as to why the idea of reincarnation is not described in the Bible by saying: ‘Oh! Reincarnation!

⁴⁶ Sathyam-1 (1) 1

⁴⁷ Priddy ‘Researched and taught philosophy and sociology at the University of Oslo 1968-85’ (<http://home.no.net/anir/Sai/> [31-7-2006]), and even wrote a thesis on ‘Objectivity....’—but see <http://www.saisathyasai.com/baba/Ex-Baba.com/A-Priddy/robert-priddy-deception.html> [1-1-2006].

⁴⁸ <http://home.no.net/abacusa/T/eel.htm> [18-7-2006]

⁴⁹ (26-5-1990) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume23/sss23-16.pdf> [13-7-2007]

You cannot understand it. Do not try to think about it.’—i.e. as if the question was about the “mechanics” of reincarnation—but this, I would argue, is analogous to what we saw Beyerstein noting above as Sathya Sai Baba’s greater interest in the moral of any particular story than its specific historical details. Moreover, as Beyerstein (1994) also notes, Sathya Sai Baba sometimes claims to deliberately feign ignorance, giving a traditional theological justification for this:

You know that I am asking you, not for the sake of the answer which I am already aware of, but for the sake of the satisfaction my words give you. So also, I may ask, “How are you?”” though I know that you are well and that is why you could come or that you are unwell and that is the very reason that has brought you to me! This is the *Maayaashakthi*, the spirit that charms; if it speaks, if it casts its eye, if it does something, we derive pleasure thereby! [(18-7-1970) S10 14:89]

The Sanskrit term here, as we will see (pp.385-386), is a traditional one that is sometimes invoked to portray human attributes of the avatars as “illusory”.

Priddy, however, psychopathologizes Sathya Sai Baba’s behaviour:

He treats all questions or comments which he does not like in a way that my elderly colleague Elendur [sic] Haraldsson characterised very fittingly for me as follows: “*I recall when Karlis Osis and I had our first encounter with SB [Sathya Sai Baba] we both felt that he, apart from his great charisma [sic], was a great prima donna, with a tremendous ego, and also kind of a Napoleon, with a ruler’s mind and tactics. Boasting, and illusions about one’s true characteristics is a part of such a psychological makeup, and in SB this is to a psychopathological degree unless one assumes the split-personality model to explain him which I find tempting.*”

Quite what is intended by the last part of this statement is unclear to me, and Priddy does not elaborate upon this, but it is perhaps significant that Haraldsson (1997:168) cites the testimony of an early ex-devotee of Sathya Sai Baba to the effect that: ‘Professor C.T.K. Chari [an Indian parapsychologist] thought he [Sathya Sai Baba] might be a split personality. One moment he is the crude villager, another moment he is that great soul that no one can fathom’. Presumably Haraldsson’s implication in his statement to Priddy is that Sathya Sai Baba has one psychologically healthy personality, and another discrete personality that is genuinely unaware of his ‘true characteristics’ (i.e. as a “crude villager”, or worse), and so, in its own way, “healthy”.

Haraldsson (1997:182) also notes the testimony of another early ex-devotee which expands upon the above-cited attribution to Sathya Sai Baba of acute leadership skills:

he was more of a politician than a guru that can lead us to God, because of the terrific mind he has got. ...He knows how to get things done when he wants something

from you, how to talk to you nicely, and once his need for you is over, how to keep you at arms length. ...He knew all the tactics of 'divide and rule'.

As Haraldsson (1997:184) goes on to note, however, Sathya Sai Baba—in commenting upon the first edition of his book—took exception to the testimonies of the ex-devotees just cited, psychopathologizing (in his own way) the same: 'Those of my devotees who get their desires fulfilled praise me, those who don't tend to give bad accounts'. His critics, he said, were 'young at that time, not very religious or serious', and, in contrast to their portrayals⁵⁰, 'he (Sai Baba) would, for example, never ask anyone for anything'. Perhaps this is simply "damage control" (a favourite term of the anti Sathya Sai Baba movement⁵¹) on Sathya Sai Baba's part, but, it is at least clear that religious considerations are integral to the views of at least one of his dominant personae. As Haraldsson elsewhere points out:

To display Sai Baba simply/only as some sort of a rogue is far too simplistic and really ridiculous to practically anyone who has had even a slight acquaintance with him. Sai Baba is a very complex and multi-faceted personality.⁵²

Such complexity is evident in much of what we have seen thus far. I hope to have shown that this, intensified by the controversies that I have touched upon in this section, and by his extraordinary popularity, renders him—and especially his religious persona—a fit topic for my proposed investigation, a topic deep enough and important enough to justify academic attention being devoted to it.

⁵⁰ See, especially, p.209 below.

⁵¹ See, e.g., http://home.hetnet.nl/~ex_baba/engels/articles/barrynorajones.html [11-3-2007]

⁵² From a letter to Dale Beyerstein (cited above), dated 21-10-1988, published in the *Indian Skeptic* magazine (http://www.indian-skeptic.org/html/is_vo1/1-10-10.htm [1-6-2002]).

1.3 Explaining Embodiment

It is impossible for anyone to understand or explain the meaning and significance of Swaami. There can be no possible means of approach to this manifestation, from the stage which you can attain. This is an Incarnation, an Embodiment, which is beyond anyone's comprehension. Trying to explain Me would be as futile as the attempt of a person who does not know the alphabet to read a learned volume, or the attempt to pour the Ocean into a tiny waterway.¹

“What type of teacher is she?” Sathya Sai Baba suddenly intoned, looking at me, and inclining his head towards Mata Betty, one of his long-time devotees, leader of the group to which I belonged (at centre, without a red scarf, in Fig.6). I did not know then that there were any “types” of teacher—let alone what sort Mata Betty might be—so I shrugged my shoulders and looked at Sathya Sai Baba for the answer. What I got from him, after his typical Socratic fashion, was another question: “How many types of teacher are there?” Again, I was at a loss for an answer, but, in this case, Sathya Sai Baba was happy to provide one for me: “There are three kinds of teacher: those that complain, those that explain, and those that inspire”².

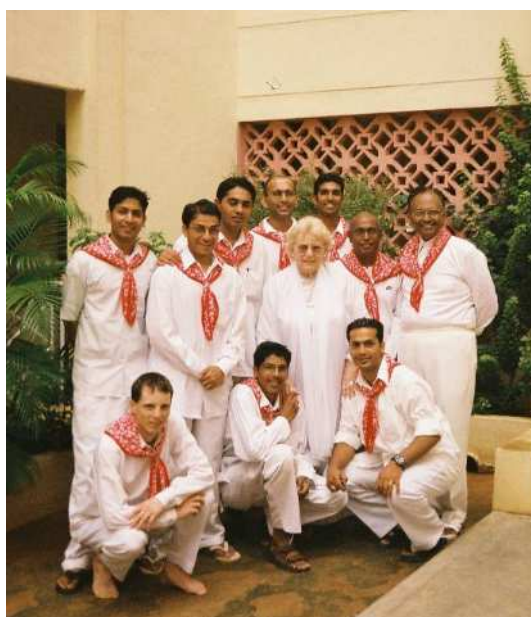


Fig.6 Myself (bottom left) and some members of the group of fellow New Zealander devotees (led by Mata Betty, centre) with which I visited Prashanthi Nilayam in August of 2002.

The third of these types, presumably, is the ideal, but, whilst I may say that I am fortunate to have mostly been blessed with teachers of this kind, this does make writing a methodology section—in which, presumably, I am to explain what precisely it is I propose to do—somewhat difficult. From Sathya Sai Baba’s perspective too, as the passage at top indicates, any approach to understanding or explaining him is inherently problematic. But, as a scholar, I must make just such an “attempt to pour the Ocean into a tiny waterway”. It is an apt metaphor, for, as we will see, there is a vast amount of both primary and secondary source material

¹ Sathya Sai Baba (9-10-1970) S10 28:170

² NB Sathya Sai Baba had said much the same thing in a public discourse some two decades earlier ((16-6-1983) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume16/sss16-13.pdf> [24-3-2007]), but I had not come across this at that time. For the record, Sathya Sai Baba went on to say that Mata Betty was the type of teacher who “explains”. Oddly, Mata Betty took this as an injunction to “explain more” in the course of her teaching, but she remains one of the most inspiring people I have ever met.

upon which I might draw in my study of Sathya Sai Baba. And the same is true of avatar ideas in general, not to mention parallel concepts in other cultures. Par-rinder (1970:7) writes in this regard that ‘the source literature is immense... and nobody could hope to read it all’. Perhaps Sathya Sai Baba’s statement at top here is not as hyperbolic as one might think.

Certainly, in line with what we saw earlier of his generally evasive manner, any attempt to question Sathya Sai Baba himself about his identity is unlikely to be very informative³. And, in any case, there is little chance of my getting another interview with him—he spoke to very few foreigners during my second visit to his ashram, and at the end of our interview he told our group (Fig.6) that we were ‘very, very lucky’ to spend time with him. Most of his time during my second visit to his ashram was consumed in talking to various VIPs, with very little spent on the general public. Furthermore, despite such apparent neglect, crowds at the ashram had increased since my first visit—and would no doubt have been even greater were it not for the rash of bad press that had appeared against him in between times. Most of the group agreed that we had only been given a chance to talk to him because of our being accompanied to the ashram by Mata Betty—who has since passed on. Without such an “inside” connection, there is almost no chance of my getting to talk to Sathya Sai Baba again. I also have insufficient “inside” contacts (and indeed am insufficiently well versed in the local language Telugu) to make any thorough attempt at interviewing any of the other figures who might be able to contribute significantly to an understanding of Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar claim. Fortunately, however, there is no shortage of accounts by such people published in English translation, and indeed no shortage of English translations of Sathya Sai Baba’s own writings and speeches.

How to go about studying these? Simply put, the key questions that I will be considering in this study as a whole are as follows. Firstly, what does Sathya Sai Baba say of (especially himself as) an avatar? This might seem like a simplistic question, but we will soon see some problems with the works of scholars who have jumped to conclusions based upon less than complete answers to this question. Part of my task will thus be descriptive—a thorough consideration of all potentially relevant primary sources (facilitated by digital searches of Sathya Sai Baba’s works for “avatar” and its synonyms), and an attempt to give a representative account of these. This is no small task, but I have already done a little of it

³ See p.405 for something approaching such an attempt (albeit directed by Sathya Sai Baba himself).

above and it is reasonably straight-forward. I must then ask, however: “Why does Sathya Sai Baba say what he does about (himself as) an avatar?” And this is not so easy to answer. Bill Aitken (2004:128-129), in his recent sympathetic biography of Sathya Sai Baba, points out that:

Inevitably, with such a voluminous number of discourses available for study, it is possible for critics to ‘prove’ almost anything about Sathya Sai. By selecting passages out of context they can show him to be a communist, capitalist, monarchist, republican, conservative, liberal, orthodox or non-conformist.

But my comprehensive answer to the first of my questions ought to help in this regard. And I will, naturally, consider something of the context of the passages I will be citing—from questions of audience and occasion (I will discuss this shortly), to the sociology of Indian religion in general (I will do something of this in the next chapter), to the biographical “development” of Sathya Sai Baba’s persona (again, I will do a little of this shortly).

I will also consider the immediate textual context of these passages, primarily with a view to understanding Sathya Sai Baba’s purpose in using them. Sathya Sai Baba’s ethical and spiritual messages in his speeches are usually made quite clear by this, but I often found such context to be less than helpful in understanding the details of the avatar traditions to which he refers. Hence, I will focus upon outlining the historical background of these traditions—presenting a rough history of the concept of the avatar, from earliest times to the present, as it relates to Sathya Sai Baba’s ideas. Through this, we can get some idea as to how various details of the avatar traditions originated, and as to how they developed in to forms similar, or parallel, to those that Sathya Sai Baba invokes. Only against this background can we get a good sense as to how and why Sathya Sai Baba adopts and/or adapts them (as the case may be). Even if I fail in all of this, my proposed approach will at least provide a further framework for my answer to my first question. And, I would add, it also better provides the potential for me to make a contribution to general scholarly understandings of traditional (and other modern) avatars. Perhaps Sathya Sai Baba’s ideas can shed some light upon these, even if they are of little help in understanding him.

Looking at the title of my study: ‘Sathya Sai Baba as Avatar: “His Story” and the History of an Idea’, I should perhaps emphasize that I am not attempting here to write a full history of the idea of the avatar—much less a biography of Sathya Sai Baba. Rather, as my title can be, and as I intend it to be, read, the focus of my study is the intersection between what I can determine of the history of ideas of

the avatar, and the “story” of Sathya Sai Baba as told in English-language works that have been published on him. A less ambiguous subtitle for my study might have been: “a history of some ideas of the avatar as pertaining to the persona of Sathya Sai Baba, and vice versa”, but in this, all poetry (and the reference to Sathya Sai Baba’s remarks on “His story”, see p.24 above) are lost. At least in the domain of titles, some poetic license is surely permissible.

In order to demonstrate something of my approach, I will briefly take up here the passage from one of Sathya Sai Baba’s speeches that I quoted at the head of this section—his proclamation of the impossibility of “explaining” his avatar identity. He elsewhere makes the same point more bluntly:

Raama came, Krishna came, Sai Baaba came, this Puttaparthi Sai Baaba comes and challengingly declares that He is all These! How can this be? ...You can never understand this phenomenon. That is the understanding you need. I am incomprehensible.⁴

Why should Sathya Sai Baba make such declarations? Some of his devotees evidently take them at face value, as a very real deterrent to intellectual investigations of him⁵, and given the controversies mentioned earlier, this could be seen as something sinister, but I would suggest here that they are to some extent a consequence of the traditional theological background upon which Sathya Sai Baba often draws. We have already seen, and indeed will see throughout this study, that whilst he may appear to give certain details about a situation, he sometimes has a non-dualistic theological agenda in doing so—this, not the veracity of any particular statement he may make, often appears to be his primary concern. Perhaps, rather than declaring his own intuitive knowledge of his incomprehensibility, he is primarily promoting this agenda.

Ideas of the ultimate incomprehensibility of the spirit (*ātman*) have a long history in Indian religious traditions, and Sathya Sai devotee M.N.Krishnamani (2001:9) quotes a verse from the *Kena Upaniṣad* [2:3] describing the *ātman* in terms that closely parallel Sathya Sai Baba’s point in the passage that I cited: ‘Those who have known Him and have known that He cannot be known, alone have known Him properly’. More to this effect, Jan Gonda (1965:147) cites another upaniṣadic description of the *ātman*: ‘Unconceivable, ...profound, mysterious, ...secret, ...unknowable, ...indescribable’, and Sheldon Pollock (1991:40) notes that incomprehensibility is central ‘to ancient myth and to the understanding of

⁴ Sathya Sai Baba (10-1961) S2 22:112-113

⁵ See, e.g., Ruhela (1985), p.2; A.N.Haskar, cited in DI 141.

the divine in early Indian thought’—connecting this with the avatar traditions:

an attempt is made to give expression to the incomprehensible character of the divine, whereby we can begin to understand that it does not exist within the world of nature... that it is not constrained by the limits of the possible....

Indeed, some traditions quite literally describe their avatars as ‘incomprehensible’, or ‘inconceivable’⁶. Perhaps Sathya Sai Baba is here drawing upon such traditions.

On top of this is a sense of incomprehensibility that derives from the very nature of the avatar as an idea in itself—as connoting a finite, human, embodiment of an infinite omniscient deity. Sathya Sai Baba says of himself:

Students are sometimes confused. They feel, if Swami is God, will He do this or that. How can you decide what God should do? No one has the authority to question the powers of God.⁷

And Pollock (1991:19,20) inadvertently parallels him in asking:

What... are the standards for deciding whether behaviour is reasonable and logical in the case of a being so resolutely unreasonable and illogical as a human embodiment of divinity?

‘What is “contradictory” in the behaviour of “human incarnations,”’ says Pollock, ‘may only be so according to a narrow theological rationalism’ imposed by Western interpreters upon Indian traditions for which these same “contradictory” aspects ‘have so often been a source of religious mystery and the object of theological reflection’. To give some concrete examples, Sathya Sai Baba says that, whilst he is sometimes ‘tender’ and compassionate, he must sometimes ‘punish’ or ‘criticize’ his devotees due to the presence of both ‘mother and father... Shiva Shakthi’ aspects in his avatar⁸; or he excuses his occasional (‘pretend’) outbursts of anger⁹ and/or wilful disregard of people¹⁰ as being ‘solely to correct the erring devotees’—just ‘love in another form’¹¹. Some of this echoes traditional portrayals of Kṛṣṇa as ‘having acted as though angry’ in order to correct wayward souls¹².

Babb (1986:186ff.) writes on the implications of such a philosophy, observing that Sathya Sai Baba’s perceived indeterminacy is ‘crucial’ to many devotees’ understandings of his divinity, as it allows for an almost total lack of accountability in

⁶ See: *Bhagavad-Gītā* 7:26, 8:9 (“*acintya*”), 10:15; *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 10:70.38, 10:16.46, 10:48.27

⁷ (23-11-1999) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume32/sss32p2-16.pdf> [16-5-2007]

⁸ SSB 74, 288

⁹ (2-10-2000) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/doo1002.html> [12-7-2007]

¹⁰ (27-9-1987) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume20/sss20-22.pdf> [12-7-2007]

¹¹ (11-2-1964) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume04/sss04-04.pdf> [12-7-2007]

¹² See, e.g., Laine (1989), p.221.

regard to his actions. Babb concludes that ‘the very haphazardness of Sathya Sai Baba’s acts—magical or not—becomes a kind of evidence in support of his claim to divinity’. And Sathya Sai Baba himself seems to actively encourage such perceptions, in this case explicitly aligning himself with Kṛṣṇa:

It is only when Yasodha found every length of rope a little short to go round His belly that she discovered He was the Lord. So too, you will realise every description of My *Mahima* (Divine Glory) a little too short of the actuality; and then you will get convinced.¹³

The reference here is to traditional stories in which Kṛṣṇa’s mother attempts in vain to bind the child Kṛṣṇa in order to stop him getting into mischief, before finally recollecting his divine nature—upon which he allows himself to be bound.¹⁴

There thus is a sense in which Sathya Sai Baba does portray himself as being comprehensible, but, as he elsewhere makes clear, this is not the type of comprehension that we are seeking here; rather, it is an assertion of traditional beliefs in the spiritual unity of human and divine (cf. p.13 above):

when Divinity comes down as *Avathaar* (divine incarnation), man is unable to pierce the veil and revere the Divine. ...Only those who are aware of the current within, the *Aathma*, can identify the Source of Power before them [(7-1974) S12 42:246].

Indeed, he explicitly states his view that the purpose of the avatar is to make ‘man aware of Him in him, when He finds him desperately searching outside of himself for Him who is his very core’¹⁵. This again echoes traditional portrayals of Kṛṣṇa—*Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, a “classical” scriptural synthesis of Kṛṣṇa mythology and theology, has Kṛṣṇa addressed as follows:

How pitiable is the ignorance of these ignorant people that they consider you, their real self, as other (different from themselves)... And thus they think that their real self is to be searched for outside in external objects.¹⁶

As we will see, Sathya Sai Baba’s often seem to draw his ideas from such works.

My attempts to contextualize Sathya Sai Baba’s popular orations with respect to “classical” traditions that were written down many centuries ago might plausibly be seen as problematic, but as Sumit Sarkar (1997:317-318) observes:

Historians in recent years have been moving away from sharp elite/popular, textual/oral disjunctions towards an understanding of ways in which elements of high textual culture could sink into and intermix with predominantly oral practices.

¹³ (23-2-1958) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume01/sss01-05.pdf> [12-7-2007]

¹⁴ See, e.g., *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 10:9.14-20.

¹⁵ Sathya Sai Baba (24-12-1980) S14 60:386

¹⁶ Tagare (1978), Part IV, p.1346.

Sarkar notes that, though illiterate, Ramakrishna (1836-1886), who we will see to be a figure closely comparable to Sathya Sai Baba:

could have relatively easy access to ‘high’ knowledge, despite poverty and lack of formal education, as he happened to be of Brahman birth. ...[Moreover, he] could imbibe mainstream Hindu traditions through watching folk theatre performances of epic and puranic tales... and he soon started acting them out himself with friends.

And we will see that, whilst Sathya Sai Baba is not of Brahmin birth¹⁷, his caste has traditionally fulfilled Brahmin roles, in fact being charged with remembrance and transmission of mythology (and, evidently, dramatization of the same). Sathya Sai Baba, despite a lack of formal religious education, grew up surrounded by “high” traditions, and it is thus no surprise that references to these constitute a significant portion of the subject matter of his discourses and writings.

This said, the chain of transmission linking such ideas to Sathya Sai Baba is not always direct. As we will see, there is evidence that the ideas of figures like Ramakrishna—modern figures who have identified themselves as avatars—have themselves influenced Sathya Sai Baba’s thinking. We may thus provide some further context for understanding Sathya Sai Baba’s claims by referring to such figures. In regard to the issue at hand, for example, we may note that, like Sathya Sai Baba, Ramakrishna (1965:216-219) avers that it is very difficult to understand or even recognise an avatar; Aurobindo (1958:410) holds that ‘it is impossible for the limited human reason to judge the way or purpose of the Divine’; and Meher Baba was believed to be ‘inscrutable, imponderable, and totally unpredictable’¹⁸. I will say more of these figures and their relationship to Sathya Sai Baba in due course. They are important in that they constitute a modern milieu within which Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar claims can be better understood. And there are some other significant areas of influence that will also be worthy of our consideration; I will hint at some of these towards the end of this section in the process of considering another example of Sathya Sai Baba’s ideas.

¹⁷ On Sathya Sai Baba’s caste see Section 2.2. NB Bharati (1981a:54) erroneously describes Sathya Sai Baba as ‘a brahmin of low literacy’, but he has written several books, and, whilst it is true that, as Haraldsson (1997:142) notes, some of his close devotees testify that he does not read newspapers [cf. Aitken (2004:152)] and ‘never had a book in his room’—this does not necessarily imply a lack of ability on Sathya Sai Baba’s part. Indeed, he treats this as an ethical issue—referring to newspapers as “nuisance papers”, or condemning novels as a “debilitating” waste of time. And Haraldsson (1997:184) writes of the first edition of his own book, a courtesy-copy of which he sent to Sathya Sai Baba: ‘My impression was that he had read it with interest. He complimented me, but also complained that I had in some instances been misinformed’ (for some of the instances in question—which cast Sathya Sai Baba in a bad light—see pp.54,209ff.).

¹⁸ Daniel Bassuk (1987b), p.83.

Several academic studies focussing on ideas of the avatar provided me with some useful starting points for my investigations. Parrinder (1970:13), who I cited earlier, comments that it ‘is remarkable that little has been written in European languages on Avatars and their meaning’, and Ludo Rocher (1980:106) similarly writes that: ‘The detailed history of Viṣṇu’s *avatāras* still remains to be written’. But a number of major works subsequent to this (including some very recent ones) have significantly rectified this situation: Frank Whaling (1980)—on Rāma; Daniel Bassuk (1987a,1987b)—on avatar-like ideas in various cultural settings; Deborah Soifer (1976,1991)—on *The Myths of Narasimha and Vāmana* (two major traditional avatars); Sheldon Pollock (1991)—on Rāma, Freda Matchett (2001)—on Kṛṣṇa; André Couture (2001)—on the word “*avatāra*”; and Noel Sheth (2002)—on philosophical aspects of avatar ideas.

On top of these, my potential primary sources in this area are so numerous and diverse that I can only meaningfully introduce them as I progress, at appropriate stages throughout my study. I will make considerable reference to these—Sanskrit and English electronic texts (e-texts) of many of the relevant works make this a much more practical proposition than it would otherwise be. One can, for example, digitally scan through thousands of pages of text and quickly locate any and every reference to the Sanskrit term *avatāra* (or any of its various forms, derivatives, or synonyms). But I will also make much use of secondary sources, for these provide a useful basis in highlighting key points for discussion. There are also numerous academic works that refer in passing to ideas of the avatar, or to traditions that might impinge upon them, and I will refer to some of these—again, there are too many for me to introduce here. Of necessity, I will focus upon aspects of all of these works that are of relevance to an understanding of Sathya Sai Baba’s persona. A fuller treatment of them is beyond the scope of this work.

Whilst I will generally opt to frame my work by way of historical narratives, there are a number of alternative approaches worth mentioning here, assorted academic analyses of various avatar traditions. Parrinder (1970:120ff.) gives “twelve characteristics of the Avatar doctrines”, and these initially proved useful to me in dividing up the large number of avatar statements that Sathya Sai Baba has

1. *In Hindu belief the Avatar is real....*
2. *The human Avatars take worldly birth....*
3. *The lives of Avatars mingle devine [sic] and human....*
4. *The Avatars finally die....*

5. *There may be historicity in some Avatars....*
6. *Avatars are repeated....*
7. *The example and character of the Avatars is important....*
8. *The Avatar comes with work to do....*
9. *The Avatar shows some reality in the world....*
10. *The Avatar is a guarantee of divine revelation....*
11. *Avatars reveal a personal god....*
12. *Avatars reveal a God of grace....*

Whilst this is obviously problematic if taken as a rigid essentialist description—applicable to any and every traditional account the avatars (such accounts, as we will see, are extremely diverse)—it perhaps has some value as an indication of some of the general questions raised in the context of some of the major avatar traditions (i.e. “are avatars believed to be real?”; “do avatars take worldly birth?” etc.). At the very least, it gave me a starting point in my approach to my material.

Not all would agree with my use of such a starting point. Parrinder (1970:223) later notes that most of the above “characteristics” are applicable to Christian understandings of the Incarnation of Jesus, and, to Deborah Soifer (1991:4), this and similar observations made by Parrinder, completely invalidate his work:

Such an approach demonstrates the danger of translating Hindu (or any non-Eurocentric) concepts into Christian terminology and highlights the differences and incomparability of the two traditions on this point, rather than uphold [*sic*] any valid similarities.

Soifer (1991:4-5), concludes that:

By default, studies such as Parrinder’s *Avatar and Incarnation* indicate that the avatāra is most deeply rooted in mythology and exhibits little significance as a theological construct.

But, whilst this criticism suits the context of her analysis of mythological motifs occurring in traditional tales of the avatars, I would argue that she is not justified in making such a generally dismissive statement.

Many traditional authors understood the avatar in a theological manner, and a summary of the beliefs of some of them, given by S.K.De (1961: 250-251), shows that they were concerned with some of the same issues that Parrinder outlines:

- (i) The supreme being, though one, can manifest himself in various forms, all forms being real, perfect, eternal and intelligential, but there are degrees of excellence in the character of the manifestations.
- (ii) The Avatāra is real and not illusory, but he is also supernatural (*divya*) and eternally existent (*nitya*).

- (iii) The form or body assumed is non-natural and incorruptible (*aprākṛta*) and has nothing of the grossness of earthly forms (*apārthiva*). It is an intelligential essence (*jñānātmā*), but it consists of a Vighraha or concrete form of pure existence, bliss and intelligence (*saccidānanda-vighraha*) like the form of the deity himself. The Avatāra thus retains absolute knowledge, absolute existence and absolute bliss, as well as omnipotence and the power to grant salvation (*mokṣadatva-svabhāva*)....
- (iv) The Avatāra assumes human nature in two ways... the shape and form of man (*manuṣya-saṃniveśatva*) and the ordinary human acts (*manuṣya ceṣṭā*).
- (v) The humanity is real, but it is human reality without its imperfections....
- (vi) As the Avatāra retains divine power and perfection he is capable of performing superhuman (*atimartya*) acts.
- (vii) Although some of the Avatāras appeared in past ages, yet being eternal they are still worthy of worship. Each Avatāra has not only a distinctive form or body, but also a place of habitation in a particular Loka [“world”].
- (viii) The Avatāra is a partial descent or manifestation in the sense that the deity exists at the same time in his essential and complete form. The obvious object of descent is to do good to the world, but since the supreme being cannot be regarded as having a particular motive, the descent occurs as an aspect of his grace (*Prasāda*), which is a display of his inherent Śakti, to his faithful devotee....
...the Vṛndāvana [Kṛṣṇa] legend is taken not as religious myth but as religious history.

It would be better to allot Parrinder’s work some—at least provisional—validity, than to dismiss it “by default” as Soifer does. I will thus comment briefly on some of Parrinder’s “characteristics” at appropriate stages below, and will address others of them in detail in my Discussion chapter (Chapter 6). And I will much cite other, less problematic, aspects of his work throughout my study¹⁹.

The general issue here has been much debated by academics under the headings of “emics” (*‘categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the native members of the culture whose beliefs and behaviours are being studied’*) and “etics” (*‘analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the community of scientific observers’*). There is no space here for me to summarize even the key points of this debate; I will settle for

¹⁹ NB I will, however, largely exclude from my consideration a number of other works that primarily take a philosophical or theological approach to ideas of the avatar—those, for example, of Heinrich Barlage (1977), James Crowe (1989) and N.V.George (1997). (For references to a few other similar studies see Daniel Bassuk (1987b:xii)). Whilst other scholars to whom I will refer (Whaling, Parrinder, Bassuk) hail from explicitly Christian backgrounds, and yet others (Sheth) focus on philosophical issues, they include in their studies extensive historical perspectives on the avatar—obviously of some relevance to me.

agreeing with James Lett (1990:138), from whom I have taken these italicized definitions, and who concludes that: ‘Ultimately, the value of emics and etics must lie in their utility, or the extent to which they contribute to our understanding of sociocultural phenomena’. Mine will very much be a pragmatic approach, and, in this, I see no reason for preferring emic over etic categories—much recent scholarly preaching to the contrary notwithstanding. The points listed above by De, for example, obviously closely reflect (some) traditional ideas, but they are not very suitable for my purposes. They are more convoluted than Parrinder’s characteristics, and no better in encapsulating the great diversity of Indian avatar traditions. And, other emic lists drawn from particular localized or individualized traditions are similarly problematic²⁰. Sathya Sai Baba’s own list of sixteen ‘marks’ of the avatar (p.116 below) has almost no significance as an objective description. We will see that he himself is extremely inconsistent in relating the details of this list, and, moreover, that the various details he includes are drawn from works that originated in contexts that are traditionally unconnected with the avatars.

As I indicated earlier, in the time that I have been writing this thesis, major advances have been made in the area of information technology²¹, and these, if used wisely²², can provide great (if “etic”) assistance to almost any scholarly endeavour. CAQDAS, “computer aided qualitative data analysis” is an emerging field²³, and one upon which I would have drawn more, had I encountered it earlier in the course of my studies. As it is, I have been fortunate that the majority of my sources for this study, both primary and secondary, are available in digital form. Just one month into my project, the Sathya Sai Organisation made available online all thirty-odd volumes of Sathya Sai Baba’s collected speeches (“*Sathya Sai Speaks*”). I later discovered online versions of all of Sathya Sai Baba’s writings (the “*Vahini*” series) and, later still, his discourses to students (“*Summer Showers*”) and some of his most famous “interviews”. Using this material then, and a variety of digital search software (and other resources, such as the online “index” to Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings—mentioned earlier, p.6), what I did, initially, was to

²⁰ See, e.g.: Daniel Bassuk (1987a), p.79; Adwaita P. Ganguly (1996), p.40.

²¹ E.g.: Google has grown from a gimmick (in which one might just as well click the “I’m feeling lucky” button) to an access-point for the full text of millions of academic works (via Google Books, Amazon, Oxford Scholarship Online, JSTOR etc.); Wikipedia, which did not exist when I began this study, has become an authoritative source of concise information on all manner of subjects.

²² See John Brockington (1998), pp.519ff. for a discussion of some of potential benefits and pitfalls resulting from the use of electronic texts in studying the traditional Indian epics.

²³ See, e.g., Uwe Flick (2006).

divide up, according to Parrinder's characteristics, any and every published statement attributed to Sathya Sai Baba in which he referred to his avatar persona. Through this, I at least became familiar with Sathya Sai Baba's views on avatars and with some of the most prominent traditional views, as described by Parrinder. Eventually, however, found it necessary to go beyond Parrinder's analysis. And analyses provided by a number of other scholars proved to be similar cases—useful in some respects, but insufficient for my purposes.

Daniel Bassuk (1987b:97ff.) concludes his study of Indian avatars (he, like Parrinder, refers to analogues of this idea in other cultural contexts) by presenting a list of 'Criteria for Avatarhood based on Mythemes'—key mythic motifs that recur in traditional and modern Indian accounts of avatar figures. Indeed, some of these recall aspects of Parrinder's characteristics: Firstly, a 'GOLDEN AURA' (by which he means 'golden imagery', see below); secondly, 'THE DIVINE SERPENT' (see p.145 below)—tying in with the first mytheme, since 'one of the roles of the cobra in ancient Hindu Literature was to guard gold'; next, a 'PREORDAINED BIRTH' (cf. Parrinder's second "characteristic"—see Section 6.2) and a 'SUFFERING DEATH' (a variation upon Parrinder's fourth characteristic, see p.391 below); taking a 'DIVINE NAME' and acting as a 'PARENT FIGURE' (see p.280); having 'DISCIPLES' (see p.309 below); possessing 'SUPERNATURAL POWERS' (i.e. the "divine" part of Parrinder's third characteristic, see p.346); and, finally, 'APOCALYPTIC EXPECTATION' (a consequence of Parrinder's sixth characteristic, "Avatars are repeated"—see p.341). I will discuss most of these at above-noted places in the main body of my study, but I will briefly expand upon one of these by way of example here—Bassuk's first mytheme, attributing a 'golden aura' to the avatars.

Bassuk writes:

Matsya the fish Avatar has golden scales, and the man-lion Avatar kills golden-garment. The golden aura relates the Avatar to his progenitor, Vishnu, the solar, golden deity, and... may be a reflection of what is stated in the Isa Upanishad, 'The door of the True is covered with a golden disk' (verse 15), and the Avatar's golden aura is a reflection of his transcendence... since gold is not part of the colour spectrum it appears to emanate from a transcendent source. Among modern Avatars Chaitanya is known as the golden Avatar, the Mother of Pondicherry encircles herself with golden imagery, and Satya Sai Baba wearing golden robes materializes golden rings.

Here Bassuk's attribution of 'golden robes' to Sathya Sai Baba is somewhat fanciful—he may have very occasionally worn golden robes, but it stretches the imagination to cast his overwhelmingly favoured orange gowns in this light (cf. p.105

below). Nevertheless, we will see that there is some truth in Bassuk's assertion of linkages of Viṣṇu with the Sun, and that this has echoes in Sathya Sai Baba's cult²⁴. And I would add to his observations that Kṛṣṇa characteristically wears yellow robes; that Sathya Sai Baba (as we saw earlier, p.44) produces golden *liṅgams* that are symbols of transcendence; and that he is even believed to quite literally have a golden "aura"—an American devotee writes:

A golden light encircled his head. It was not like the halo seen in artists' drawings. The strong golden light—as if one were looking at a sheet of pure gold that was illuminated in some fashion or other—came from his scalp, up through the hair, and extended about 12 inches from his head. The edge of the light was not even, but was somewhat irregular. When he moved his head, the halo of gold moved with the head, and this natural movement revealed a second extraordinary situation. Against the wall, behind Baba's head, there was a round disk of gold, whose diameter appeared to be somewhat smaller than the halo. This circle of gold was quite even around its edges, but the truly amazing feature was that it remained quite stationary... [when questioned] Baba replied, "It is always there. Anyone can see it at any time. Only an intensity of interest is required." [MBI 38,39]

Sathya Sai Baba does not, however, connect this phenomenon with his avatar persona, and golden imagery, whilst certainly present, does not seem to have much of a definitive role in the literature surrounding other (traditional or modern) avatars. This, as we will see to be the case with most of Bassuk's other mythemes, whilst contributing a few valid and interesting points, fails to really explain very much.

An analysis suggested by Deborah Soifer (1991:8-9), writing on *The Myths of Narasimha and Vāmana* (two of the major traditional avatars) is a similar case. She identifies 'characteristics appearing over and over in ...sample readings of the avatāra myths (which extended beyond Narisimha [*sic*] and Vāmana myths)':

1. A special relationship with Indra....
2. Invocation of a cosmogonic scenario....
3. Mediating power and activity....
4. Action through trickery....
5. The loophole in the law....

But she herself concludes that these are not borne out by even her own material, and Aditya Malik (2005:89-90), addressing Soifer's work, likewise concludes that these motifs do not characterize the avatar-hero of a folk-tradition upon which he focuses. Malik does note, however, that they (with the exception of the first) are evocative of this tradition 'as a whole'—i.e. when elements other than the avatar-

²⁴ See p.130. NB The passage cited here might also be compared to the '*prabhāmaṇḍala*' ("circle of light"), which, according to the *Mahābhārata*, surrounds *Nārāyaṇa* (E. Senart 1882,115).

protagonist are included for consideration—and Soifer similarly concludes that these other characteristics (again, for the most part, with the exception of the first) *are* relevant to understanding the Narasimha and Vāmana avatars, albeit that they arise more from their traditional cosmological settings than from anything integral to the avatar concept itself. But such settings, whilst certainly present in Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar teachings, are far less central to these than they are to the traditional accounts. He generally interprets traditional cosmogonies in a strictly philosophical fashion (see pp.190,161), and sometimes even denies aspects of them (pp.196,340), or connects modern cosmogonic theories to the avatar (see p.127).

One thing that Soifer does not specifically address, but which Parrinder mentions, and which others have picked up on²⁵, is the idea that the avatars come with a definite purpose, and this is something that Sathya Sai Baba does often refer to, and that is a major feature of most avatar accounts (traditional and modern). If we were to posit any “universal” of avatar ideas, this would be it²⁶. Freda Matchett (2001:16off.), in her study of the figure of Kṛṣṇa, writes:

From its first known instances, the *avatāra* myth is connected with the idea of purpose. Not every transformation of a divine figure is regarded as an *avatāra*, but only those which take place with certain ends in view. ...

- i) the protection of *dharma* [“righteousness”] and the punishment of *adharma*;
- ii) the removal of the earth’s burden;
- iii) the welfare of the universe;
- iv) the destruction of *asuras* [demons];
- v) the provision of the means of liberation;
- vi) spontaneous enjoyment (*līlā*).

Sathya Sai Baba generally subscribes to this view—he says: ‘In each *Yuga* [“age”], the Divine has incorporated itself as an *Avathaar* for some particular task’²⁷. But, again, with one exception—the first of these purposes (something of which we will see shortly)²⁸, the particular details of this list do not loom large in his teachings. Nor are they fully representative of his, or even of traditional, views—Parrinder (1970:124) notes a theme that Matchett does not pick up on: ‘showing the divine nature and love’ as another important purpose of the traditional avatars.

What Sathya Sai Baba does predominantly draw upon, rather than any such ab-

²⁵ E.g. R.N.Dandekar (1976:45) writes that ‘The *avatāra*-theory is essentially purpose oriented’.

²⁶ NB Parrinder’s “repetition of the avatars” would be another; I will say something of this later.

²⁷ Sathya Sai Baba (18-8-1968) S8 28:157

²⁸ NB On the other purposes listed by Matchett, see, e.g., pp.136,218 below.

stracted essentials of avatar ideas (i.e. the lists of Parrinder, Bassuk and Soifer also), are the particular details of various traditional avatar accounts. And to understand these, we must go beyond such neat lists—even if they are well founded in traditional ideas. This then, is another reason for me to investigate the relationship between Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar persona and some of the particulars of “the history of avatar ideas”. What Sathya Sai Baba himself says on the “purpose of the avatar”, for example, makes this clear. Sometimes he does present purposes akin to the above in a fairly literal manner. Thus, he claims in regard to ‘the revival of *Dharma* (righteousness)’, that this ‘one task includes all else’²⁹, and he says that a major purpose of the avatar is ‘to shower His love on all mankind’³⁰. But, elsewhere, he variously describes his mission as fourfold, threefold, or twofold—viz.: protecting devotees, protecting *dharma*, and protecting the Vedas, with the latter two of these purposes sometimes being considered to be synonymous³¹, and with the protection of vedic scholars sometimes added in as the fourth purpose³². This last purpose is also one of the major traditional duties and means of legitimation for Hindu kings³³, and we will see—especially in Chapter 3 below, in which I will consider the earliest history of avatar-like ideas—that traditional ideas of sacred kingship find significant echoes in Sathya Sai Baba’s persona.

In another variation on his above-mentioned threefold manifesto, Sathya Sai Baba substitutes “protection of women” and “protection of property” for the more generally stated “protection of devotees and *dharma*”³⁴. In this, he mentions previous avatars, and so is presumably aligning himself with traditional epic stories that tell of Rāma’s rescue of his wife Sītā, and of Kṛṣṇa’s helping his cousins to regain their kingdom. Elsewhere, Sathya Sai Baba describes his task more simply: ‘the spread of the knowledge and practice of *Dharma*’³⁵; or ‘to make the people worthy of the Lord’s grace’³⁶. He also says that ‘avatars appear again and again and help human beings, by leading an exemplary life’³⁷. And these are likewise

²⁹ (5-3-1968) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume08/ssso8-09.pdf> [10-5-2007]

³⁰ <http://members.rediff.com/saivani/SriSathyaSaiBaba.htm> [19-4-2007]

³¹ Sathya Sai Baba (25-1-1963) S3 1:9-10 NB On this connection, see p.244 below. Heesterman (1978:81,92-94) points out that the content of the Vedas has very little to do with *dharma*.

³² Sathya Sai Baba (23-11-1962) S2 48:271-272

³³ See, e.g., J.C.Heesterman (1987), p.93.

³⁴ Sathya Sai Baba (31-8-1972) S11 45:293

³⁵ Sathya Sai Baba (10-10-1964) S4 31:184-185

³⁶ (11-10-1997) <http://sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume30/ssso30-29.pdf> [14-6-2007]

³⁷ SSB 1978 55

traditional views—for, as we will see, “grace” is a major theme of many of the avatar traditions, and *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 10:69.40, for example, has Kṛṣṇa say: ‘I am the promulgator of Dharma. It is I who practice it and grant my approbation to it. I have descended on this world for teaching it by my example’³⁸. In all of this, Sathya Sai Baba is following the lead of traditional epic and purāṇic works (to the like of which Matchett referred in formulating her above-cited list), and these, I will consider in detail in Chapters 3, 4, and 6 below.

At other times, however, Sathya Sai Baba presents what I will call a “spiritualized” take on such ideas. Thus, for example, in one instance he construes the “protection of the good and punishment of the wicked” implied in the first of the above purposes to be merely an exercise in verbal chastisement or encouragement—in the service of the more philosophical ideal of “Truth”:

this Incarnation has come to uphold the True and suppress the False. I behave like you, moving, singing, laughing, journeying, but watch out for the blow I inflict [all] of a sudden, to chastise and to warn. I shall scorch the wrong-doer for his wrong and soothe the virtuous for his righteousness [(18-8-1968) S8 28:157].

In another instance, rather than the more traditional view that the good are to be protected by the avatar from their demonic enemies, he proclaims that they are to be protected from ‘*ashaanti* (grief) caused by want of knowledge of the relative unimportance of worldly things’³⁹, having their ‘faith and courage’ (rather than their material wellbeing) protected by the avatar⁴⁰. Or he suggests that it is not good people as such who are the proper objects of his protection, but the spiritual qualities within them⁴¹, and not bad people (or demons, *asuras*) who ought to be destroyed, but ‘bad thoughts’⁴². And such ideas are typical of some of the medieval philosophical interpretations of the avatars—such as I will especially discuss in Chapter 4 below. To give a brief example here, Angelika Malinar (2001:94) writes that the famous philosopher ‘Śaṅkara [treated in many works as an avatar, see p.141], is never directly involved in the violence which goes along with the *avatāra* function... [he] defeats his opponents only through his superior knowledge’.

Furthermore, Sathya Sai Baba (citing *Bhagavad-Gītā* 4:8, the most famous traditional proclamation of the principles under discussion here⁴³) says that it is not just

³⁸ Tagare (1978), Part IV, p.1693

³⁹ (10-7-1959) <http://sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume01/ssso1-21.pdf> [14-6-2007]

⁴⁰ Sathya Sai Baba (14-1-1962) S2 29:153

⁴¹ GV 59

⁴² (28-9-1987) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume20/ssso20-23.pdf> [14-6-2007]

⁴³ See p.281 below.

good “people” who are to be protected, but all good creatures:

“*Parithraanaaya Saadhoonaam*” in the Geetha does not mean the “protection of *saadhus* or ascetics;” it means the “protection of all who have *saadhu* virtues;” ‘*saadhu*’ means ‘good.’ Good virtues might be found even in animals and insects and worms. He will guard and guide even such [(14-1-1962) S2 29:153-154].

And here, there may be local influences upon his thinking. Konduri Sarojini Devi (1990:33), writing of *Religion in Vijayanagara empire* (this empire being the most powerful medieval political entity that subsumed the area that is now Sathya Sai Baba’s locale, see Fig.23, and Section 4.6 below), describes an influential 16th century Telugu work (composed in Śrī Kālahastī, Fig.23) as a ‘panegyric of Śiva emphasizing the ease with which the grace of the Lord could be obtained even by animals, reptiles and insects through devotion’⁴⁴. Such potential local influences are also obviously worthy of some consideration.

Finally, we find that Sathya Sai Baba is keen to completely exonerate previous avatars from their perhaps morally questionable function of destruction (whether literal or allegorical), saying that: ‘Krishna is said to have destroyed many wicked persons. But this is not quite correct. It is their own wickedness which destroyed these evil persons’⁴⁵. This, I will refer to as “ethicization” of tradition (in which the focus is upon moral, rather than philosophical spiritual lessons), and it is something that especially achieves prominence in modern avatar ideas—these, I will discuss in Chapter 5. Not that Sathya Sai Baba is necessarily drawing upon the interpretations of others here—as we will see in the next section, he is sometimes genuinely innovative—but such interpretations at the very least provide parallel cases against which Sathya Sai Baba’s ideas might be better understood. This, then, will be the cornerstone of my approach to “explaining” Sathya Sai Baba.

⁴⁴ NB On this work, see Hank Heifetz and Velcheru Narayana Rao (1987).

⁴⁵ (28-8-1994) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume27/sss27-23.pdf> [3-5-2007]

1.4 Incarnation & Innovation

Only those that are proficient in the *Shaastras* can recognise an *Avathaar* and test the credentials; only they can taste the joy showered by the Incarnation.¹

The passage here perhaps provides some further justification, native to my primary source material, for my declared attempt to understand Sathya Sai Baba's avatar persona in the light of historical precedents. Sathya Sai Baba specifically claims that the *Śāstras* ("scriptures"²) delineate characteristics of the avatars, and that there is a traditional precedent for this claim itself (see p.234 below) only serves to highlight this. Moreover, we will see that some specific characteristics that draw upon traditional precedents *are* claimed by Sathya Sai Baba (or at least attributed to him by his followers)³. Bassuk (1987b:87) notes, for instance, that Sathya Sai Baba is believed to have 'circular mark[s] the *Samku* [conch] [and] *Chakram* [wheel], on the soles of his feet', and Sathya Sai Baba's biographer R. Padmanaban (2000:328) cites an early devotee's recollection of this:

Baba would often go swimming... When He would emerge from the river and sit on the sands, He used to show others his tender Feet. Those who swam along with Him had this to say—under His soles one could see the impressions of a conch and a wheel—traditional insignia associated with Lord Vishnu.

However dismissive we might be of the reality of the phenomenon described here, it is clear that Sathya Sai Baba and his devotees present his divine persona as being sanctioned by its accordance with traditional ideas⁴.

This is not, however, universally the case. As we will see, there are instances in which Sathya Sai Baba makes statements that deliberately contrast with, or even contradict, traditional understandings. Statements that we might call "innovative". Some of his views on the very idea of the avatar exemplify this. "Avatar" is an Anglicization of the (north) Indian word "*avatār*", from the Sanskrit "*avatāra*"—the etymology of which, Parrinder (1970:19) nicely explicates:

An *avatāra* is a descent, a 'down-coming' (from a verb *tṛī* [= *tṛ*], to cross over, attain, save, with the prefix *ava*, down; and so *ava-tṛī* [= *ava-tṛ*], descend into, appear, become incarnate). The Avatar is an appearance of any deity on earth, or descent from heaven, but is applied especially to the descents or appearances of Vishnu.

¹ Sathya Sai Baba (17-10-1961) S2 16:73

² NB This is to take *śāstra* in a very general sense (see p.234 below) and to ignore the oral origins of most of the works connoted by this term, but I can think of no more adequate translation.

³ See, especially, Section 4.2 below.

⁴ NB Kṛṣṇa is said to have 'lotus flowers and wheels on his palms' and other signs on his feet (Prabhupada, 1982, 158). See also Gustav Roth (1987), and p.139, n.17 below.

Usually, Sathya Sai Baba's ideas accord with this; he writes, for example, that:

Avathaar means descent. To stoop down to lift up the child for coddling and to raise man, who is caught up in petty desires and trivial pursuits, Divinity descends to the human level [(31-8-1983) S16 23:124-125].

Interestingly, however, we find that he sometimes refutes the very possibility of a 'descent' of God:

There is no such thing as God "descending" on earth or leaving it.... Rama, Krishna, Allah, Zoroaster, Buddha and Sai Baba... all these names represent the One Atma. True worship consists in regarding all the forms as one and worshipping the Divine in the form of Love and Truth [(23-11-1988) S21 33:267, 268].

This exemplifies what I have opted to call a "spiritualization" of traditional ideas—through Sathya Sai Baba's affinity for non-dualistic theology. It is also another "ethicization" of traditional understandings—the human forms (or philosophical/devotional qualities) that traditional avatar ideas generally ascribe to the divine are here denied in favour of the ethical qualities "Love and Truth".

This last point highlights a major theme in Sathya Sai Baba's understanding of what comprises an avatar. As an alternative to the term avatar, he often uses the word '*swaruupa*' (i.e. *svārūpa*, usually translated in Sathya Sai Baba's discourses as "Embodiment"⁵), and he frequently speaks of himself as an embodiment of various ethical or spiritual qualities, e.g.: 'love' (*prema*)⁶, 'truth' (*satya*)⁷, 'bliss' (*ānanda*)⁸. There is certainly some traditional basis for such claims; Noel Sheth (2002:99-100,n18) notes for example that 'the Nimbarka school' (founded by an eponymous theologian, c.12th century CE) includes in its typology of avatars: '*Svarūpāvatāras*, that is, *avatāras* who are the manifestation of God himself in his being (*sat*), consciousness (*cit*), and bliss (*ānanda*)'. Also perhaps comparable here are traditional passages which describes Kṛṣṇa as '*jñāna-svarūpam*'—the "embodiment of wisdom"⁹, and 'the embodiment of the supreme Brahman... *parabrahma-svarūpiṇam*'¹⁰. But there is a shift in purpose from these traditional forms to those employed by Sathya Sai Baba; he emphasizes the ethical, rather than the traditionally favoured ontological or metaphysical connotations of these terms¹¹. Thus he tells

⁵ NB *Svarūpa* literally means "own-form", and also can have the sense of "true nature".

⁶ Sathya Sai Baba (2-12-1961) S2 27:146; cf. (2-9-1991) S24 23:257

⁷ E.g. Sathya Sai Baba (7-9-1966) S6 22:116, cf. (23-11-1985) S18 25:167

⁸ E.g. Sathya Sai Baba (23-11-1979) S14 43:279

⁹ *Brahma-Purāṇa* 180:11

¹⁰ *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa* 5.13.22, cited and translated by Matchett (2001), p.98.

¹¹ On *sat*, *cit*, *ānanda*, see p.236 below. *Jñāna* in this context is primarily an attribute of divinity

his devotees that an implication of the first of his above identifications is that they ‘should grow in *prema*’; the second, he presents to instil faith that a “vow” made by traditional avatar figures to protect the ‘welfare and safety’¹² of their devotees is ‘no empty assurance’; and the third he gives in the context of urging his devotees not to have ‘hatred towards other religions’ but rather to focus upon ‘Divine love’ which ‘will confer lasting *Aanandha*’. Shifts in purpose of this type—“ethicizations” of tradition—are common in Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings. Looking back at the first of his above-quoted proclamations on the avatar concept, we might see ethicization even there: as he promises “salvation” from the commonplace modern afflictions of ‘petty desires and trivial pursuits’ rather than the more traditional catastrophic, world-threatening, cosmological scenarios that accompany many descriptions of the major traditional avatars; and as he poetically highlights the primary purpose of the avatar (“descent”) as being ‘to raise man’ (rather than the more traditional purposes of killing demons etc.). I should note, however, that the last of these ideals is a common modern view of the avatars (see p.344 below); if Sathya Sai Baba is innovating here, he is certainly not alone in doing so.

Some attention is due here to the question of what precisely we should understand to be connoted by the term “innovation”. Before I can address this, I should also say something of the term “tradition” that I have already found much occasion to employ above. This latter concept especially has been much discussed and variously understood by scholars—so variously in fact, that an attempt to summarize the debate is beyond what I am able to accomplish here¹³. Any use of the term “tradition”, or “traditional” is controversial, but I would argue that so long as it is understood that I do not take this to indicate any absolute or unchanging entity, there ought to be no major problem here¹⁴. Jan Heesterman (1985:1) suggests that a (once prevalent) erroneous view of tradition in India as unchanging ‘owes much to the [modern Western academic] observer’s feeling of having lost his own traditional moorings, which makes him cast around for the certainty of tradition’, but, as I hope is already apparent, I personally do not attribute certainty to any “tradition”, Indian or otherwise, and not even to the words of Sathya Sai Baba—as is evident in Section 1.1. above, I have learned from experience not to do

(see p.232) rather than a human virtue (cf. p.243 below). On *brahman*, see p.94 below.

¹² I.e. *Bhagavad-Gītā* 9:22.

¹³ See William Jackson (1994:260ff.) for a lengthy, if not, by his own admission, ‘exhaustive’ treatment of ways that ‘tradition has already been troped traditionally’.

¹⁴ Burke (1993:189) concludes merely that it is ‘time to abandon the traditional notion of tradition’.

so. And Heesterman himself goes on to point out that, in any case, Indian ‘scriptures do indeed strongly project the image of a monolithic world order, the *dharma*’; Sathya Sai Baba certainly holds *dharma* to be unchanging (see, e.g., p.206). Albeit that such a notion of tradition falls short of describing the ever-developing reality behind his and most “scriptural” views, the changes in such views that do take place over time are not always random or extreme—it seems clear that there are some areas of genuine continuity and stability. By “tradition”, then, I simply mean ideas that are handed down from one generation to another, undergoing various degrees of change in form or function over time, but having some determinable states or aspects upon which we might draw in contextualizing later developments and in classifying them as innovative or traditional.

Of course, the dividing line will not always be clear-cut. Michael Williams, Collett Cox, and Martin Jaffee (1992:10-11) suggest that rather than conceiving of innovation as ‘a “break” with tradition’, we should consider it to be ‘something “natural” to religious tradition, as a modality of tradition itself’ (for more on this see pp.190,211 below). Similarly, Sheldon Pollock (1991:19) cautions that ‘what at first sight may appear to be innovation may in reality be amplification or elucidation’. But Williams et al. (1992:7) acknowledge that ‘religious innovation’ may nonetheless have some utility as an analytical category, defining ‘religious innovation’ simply as ‘a “significant” change’. What I am attempting to do with terms like “ethicization” and “spiritualization” is to highlight changes that strike me as being significant. Williams et al. (1992:3,4,7) do raise the important rhetorical question: ‘significant to whom?’ And they point out that:

the outsider to a tradition may see innovation in instances where the insider sees continuity.... But the opposite “mistake” can also be made, so that an outsider fails to notice innovation precisely where insiders happen to be quite self-conscious of it.... Thus, while in the case of some categories in the comparative study of religion (e.g., scripture, ritual) it might be possible to construct more absolute working definitions, this is not the case with religious innovation. By its very nature it is a relative category, and its analytical usefulness depends precisely upon the recognition of this, and upon the identification of the interpretive perspectives that are appropriate in different analytical situations.

In the above-quoted instances of what I have just classified as innovation on the part of Sathya Sai Baba, the interpretive perspective in operation is obviously my own—an outsider’s (“etic”) perspective (in that it is not me personally who is innovating here). It is true that Sathya Sai Baba himself does not usually present such instances as innovative (he often speaks, rather, of finding the “inner mean-

ing” of tradition, or the “correct interpretation”, see pp.173,231), but in the present context, a critical academic study, we must frame these as euphemisms on his part, and point out that, despite such assertions, he *is* making some significant changes (albeit often in accordance with earlier or parallel traditions). These etic categories allow us to see things that any purely emic approach would miss, and hence, I would argue, my use of them is justified.

An important etic concept that ties in here is that of “charisma”, rooted in the ideas of German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920). Whilst Weber’s more grandiose ideas (Eurocentric meta-narratives on world-history) have been much criticized¹⁵, and his specific analytical terms much debated¹⁶, some of his ideas (like those of Parrinder etc. discussed in the previous section of this chapter) nonetheless retain some utility. “Charisma” is one of these. Edward Shils (1984:228) writes that ‘Max Weber regarded the charismatic personality as the “specifically ‘creative’ revolutionary force in history”; he regarded him as the breaker of traditions’, and, as Peter Haley (1980:196) notes:

Weber is fond of quoting Jesus’ phrase in the Sermon on the Mount as evidence of this revolutionary transformative character of the charismatic: “It is written..., but I say unto you....”

We will see a number of examples in Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings that (quite literally) fit the pattern set out in this famous phrase (see, e.g., pp.77,340 below). But, importantly, as Shils goes on to note, it is ‘necessary to recognize that a tradition into which a charismatic figure enters does indeed persist’, and Haley too, writing of Rudolph Sohm—upon whom Weber drew in formulating his concept of charisma—points out that:

Sohm’s charismatics more nearly approximate the idea Jesus expressed immediately after: “Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one Tittle shall in no wise pass from the law.”

We will see this type of understanding too borne out in Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings—witness the quotation at the head of this section.

Heinrich von Stietencron (2001:18-20) questions how applicable Weber and Sohm’s formulations of charisma may be to Indian traditions, and writes that:

In the Indian literary tradition, the notion of charisma is first and primarily linked to the king. ...charisma was conceived of as a kind of subtle, luminous substance that could be conferred on a deserving person by a God or by ritual action. ...it described

¹⁵ See, e.g., Smith (2003); Frank (1998).

¹⁶ See, e.g., Peter Blau (1963); Donald McIntosh (1970); Martin Riesebrodt (1999).

the faculty to know and achieve what others were unable to know and do, as well as that golden radiance which can be perceived in a victor or in a powerful, successful king. ...Charisma was thus God-given. ...Later Indian mythology also sees royal charisma as a property of the divine, particularly of Viṣṇu. ...the king is represented as an embodiment of the eight guardian deities of the world and his task mirrors theirs: to protect the established order of the world. The more famous and slightly later version of a similar idea of divine incarnation is the concept of *prādurbhāva* or *avatāra*, according to which the God Viṣṇu himself ‘becomes manifest’ or ‘descends’ and incorporates himself, or part of himself, on earth. ...It is the presence of divine agency in human form that is common to these concepts.

Given what we saw in Section 1.3 above with Bassuk’s attribution of a “golden aura” to the avatars (and what we saw of the particular manifestation of this in the case of Sathya Sai Baba), the reference here to “golden radiance” is interesting, as is the observation that traditional representations of kingship prefigure the avatar concept. Indeed, von Stietencron gives ‘*tejas*’ as one of the traditional terms for the ‘charisma’ to which he is referring here—we will see that this term is invoked in explaining extraordinary phenomena surrounding the birth of various avatars (including Sathya Sai Baba), and David Smith (1985:60) observes that ‘lustre, or fiery energy (*tejas*) is a regular attribute of kings’. But this attempt to combine the etic concept of charisma with emic terms only complicates matters¹⁷.

All of the above interpretations of “charisma” are important indicators of broad patterns into which we have seen, or will see, Sathya Sai Baba to fit, but the emphasis of Weber’s formulation reflects its relationship to a larger scheme outlining distinct types of “authority”, and this scheme is more readily applicable to my concerns. Michael Hill (1973:144) writes:

Weber states that the validity of claims to legitimacy may rest on one or a combination of more than one of three ‘pure types’ of authority:

1. Rational grounds—resting on a belief in the ‘legality’ of patterns of normative rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue com-

¹⁷ As Martin Riesebrödt (1999:2) notes, von Stietencron’s definition does accord with one of two distinct senses in which Weber uses the term charisma. But this sense, I would suggest, is better described by the term “mana”—carrying the dual sense of “prestige” and “supernatural power”. The only problem with this is that the meaning of this term itself is much debated by anthropologists (see, e.g., Roger Keesing (1984); Pierre Bettez Gravel (1995); Usher Fleising (2001)), and—since, in any case, it does not, for the most part, seem to have much applicability to my material, I will not employ it hereunder. In the few references I do make to this “energetic” phenomenon, I will, rather, as above in commenting upon von Stietencron’s ideas, stick to specific instances that use the emic term *tejas* (see pp.175,380ff.)—I will certainly not use the term charisma in this sense, for this would complicate the other sense of this term that I have outlined. Likewise, I will not much use “charisma” in the sense indicated by Sohm, for this largely overlaps with Weber’s concept of traditional authority. On the differences between Weber and Sohm’s views see Riesebrödt (1999), p.7.

mands ([rational-]legal authority).

2. Traditional grounds—resting on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of the status of those exercising authority under them (traditional authority); or finally,

3. Charismatic grounds—resting on devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him (charismatic authority).

These categories usefully delineate factors of (reasonably) universal applicability that imbue persons and ideas with authority. Indeed, as we will see, more than one work of recent scholarship that is relevant to our concerns invokes similar distinctions quite independently of Weber's terminology (see pp.156,354 below).

I will often find occasion to employ Weber's terms (taking "charisma" in its revolutionary sense) and will use these to describe the ways in which Sathya Sai Baba creates (and asserts) authority for his ideas. Thus, as in the instance with which I began this section, we will see that there are some fairly direct appeals to traditional authority made in the service of legitimating Sathya Sai Baba's avatar persona. And, as exemplified by his assertion that: 'There is no such thing as God "descending" on earth or leaving it', we will see a number of "charismatic" proclamations on his part that deliberately undermine the force of traditional ideas.

Lest it be thought that my proposed investigations along these lines reflect little more than my own scholarly predilections, I would point out here that questions have been invoked by other academics, devotees, detractors, and even Sathya Sai Baba himself, as to how "traditional" his teachings might be. Several previous scholarly studies have characterized Sathya Sai Baba's teachings as being thoroughly traditional, if eclectic. Susan Ackerman and Raymond Lee (1988:114) write that Sathya Sai Baba's movement is not 'concerned with reforming or reinterpreting Hindu beliefs and practices', and David Mearns (1995:267) likewise suggests that many of 'the rites pertaining to Baba reinforce and recodify familiar and accepted Hindu practices'. Alexandra Kent (2005:57) similarly highlights Sathya Sai Baba's 'lack of doctrinal originality'—pointing out that this 'is in keeping with Sai Baba's own contention that he is here to rekindle awareness of eternal truths, not to invent new ones'¹⁸. And, in a more narrow context, William Jackson (1994:

¹⁸ NB There are a number of devotees' works that purport to relate—with Sathya Sai Baba's sanction—teachings "channelled" from him by supposedly paranormal means, e.g.: Lucas Ralli (nd-1993); Graciela Busto (1998); and Sudha Aditya (1992). These works generally exhibit a close affinity in terms of style and content with Sathya Sai Baba's own, but they do significantly reflect the individuality of their authors. It is thus somewhat misleading that Kent repeatedly quotes Ralli as giving the words of Sathya Sai Baba (see, for example, Kent 2005, p.42) without noting the (suppos-

196-197), in a book on the famous South Indian singer-saint Tyāgarāja (1767-1847 CE)¹⁹, cites Sathya Sai Baba as an example of 20th century persons who have expressed views on this figure, saying that he ‘epitomizes the traditional view’²⁰.

There is some justification for all of these opinions, but a number of similar conclusions to which various other scholars have come are contentious. Deborah Swallow (1982:157,156) concludes of Sathya Sai Baba that:

What he offers his devotees is the traditional *bhakti* [devotional] resolution to their problems; the chance of salvation while continuing to carry out their worldly duties, if they offer him devotion. But the ways in which this devotion is demanded, and the themes Sathya Sai Baba uses to explain the dilemmas his followers face, all help to persuade them that their orthodoxy is right and proper, and their traditional values are as relevant today as ever before.

But she also cites contrary factors: ‘He cannot simply revert to time-honoured formulas... he has to be a cultural broker between traditional answers and contemporary problems’. And, as we have already seen, in addition to devotional components, there are strong philosophical strands in Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings—some of which, what’s more, themselves lean towards the “unorthodox”.

Furthermore, whilst Palmer (2005:106) sees Sathya Sai Baba’s Hindu devotees as being ‘well versed in the traditions [to which Sathya Sai Baba refers], knowing their source without it explicitly being stated’ (thus being ripe candidates for “confirmation in their orthodoxy”), Babb (1987:175) writes that: ‘Many of my [Indian] devotee-informants had only the sketchiest idea of the Hindu tradition, and this itself was sometimes gained only as a result of participation in Sathya Sai Baba’s cult’. It is surely not the case that this last group is gaining *confirmation* of its traditional beliefs—although its members might be revelling in a new found sense of tradition. But even this does not apply in some instances, such as my own encounter with Sathya Sai Baba (described earlier)—my new-found “traditional” answers to his questions, even if drawn from his teachings, were clearly not acceptable.

It is true that *bhakti* traditions often have their own strong philosophical component²¹ and, moreover, often deliberately aim to subvert any and every other tra-

edly) “channelled” nature of these (see Ralli (nd:Vol1;xiii)). NB On this phenomenon in general, but with some reference to Sathya Sai Baba, see Beverley J. Scott (1997).

¹⁹ On Tyāgarāja see Section 4.6, p.267 below.

²⁰ NB Jackson bases his comments on *Sathya Sai Speaks* Volumes 1-10, but he only cites a couple of passages from the first two of these volumes, supplementing this, it would seem, with some views expressed by Sathya Sai Baba to Jackson personally in interviews in 1981 and 1982 [Jackson (1994:202,n75; 203,n76; ,n77)].

²¹ NB Alf Hiltebeitel (1983:207) sees Biardeau as rightly criticising modern scholarship that has

dition with which they come into contact (see p.267 below). But it is too strong to conclude, as Hummel (1984:16), for example, does, that Sathya Sai Baba's teachings 'bring forth little newness with regard to content'. Robert Elwood (1973:248) too, summarizing Sathya Sai Baba's teachings, states that they are 'rather conservative' and 'fairly general':

he talks of re-establishing the authority of the Vedas and sounds, in Hindu terms, rather conservative. ...He emphasizes the values of vegetarianism and purity of diet and action characteristic of the Vishnuite tradition. He talks of the central function of the avatar, the restitution of *dharma* or divine law, but in fairly general terms.

And Babb (1983:117) avers that:

His views are simplistic, eclectic, and essentially unoriginal... it is very difficult to imagine a Hindu auditor or reader of Sathya Sai Baba's discourses reacting with surprise.

But there is direct evidence to the contrary in this last case. Even Sathya Sai Baba's current translator, Anil Kumar—who one might think ought to be thoroughly familiar with, and conditioned to, Sathya Sai Baba's ideas—reports his not infrequent astonishment at aspects of Sathya Sai Baba's teachings: 'Sometimes I even forget to translate, and instead I say, "Abba! What a statement, Swami!"'²². There is also counterevidence to assertions by Babb (1983:117) and Elwood (1973:248) that Sathya Sai Baba's teachings are generally unimportant—eclipsed by his miracles. H. Daniel Smith (1978:60) notes of Sathya Sai Baba that: 'He is certainly not loath to perform miracles, but he professes to prefer transmitting his spiritual powers and life-giving message in the form of elevating discourses and enlightening aphorisms'—Sathya Sai Baba himself sees his teachings as important.

Another view that Sathya Sai Baba expresses in regard to his teachings (see p.232) and which is reflected in the opinions of devotees and academics, and even finds its way into the published views of some of his detractors, is that his teachings are simplified versions of traditional views. Anil Kumar claims that he:

can explain the most difficult things in a simple way, certain that we can understand it. That is the purpose of the Avatar. The purpose of the Avatar is to make complicated things simple...!²³

Similarly, anti Sathya Sai Baba activist Alexandra Nagel writes that: 'His teachings can be summarised in a few of [*sic*] words, epitomising five human values: truth,

tended to 'overlook the intellectual dimensions of classical *bhakti*... and to reduce *bhakti* too quickly to the current of Hinduism which gives predominance to affectivity and thus identifies its essence in religious emotion'. But *bhakti* does do this latter too, and I will consider it in this light in Chapter 4.

²² http://groups.yahoo.com/group/saidevotees_worldnet/message/1881 [19-4-2007]

²³ http://groups.yahoo.com/group/saidevotees_worldnet/message/1877 [19-4-2007]

right conduct, peace, love and non-violence'²⁴; Hummel (1984:16) characterizes his teachings as 'essentially the old assertions bearing the imprint of Hinduism in a simplified, comprehensible form'; and Palmer (2005:104) agrees, citing a devotee's testimony to this effect. On top of this, several sociological studies of Sathya Sai Baba's localized followings present similar viewpoints—Mearns (1995:268), for example, writes that: 'In many of Baba's pronouncements and stipulations, the emphasis is on discipline and the simplification of devotion'.

Bharati (1981a:55) likewise writes:

[Sathya Sai Baba's] sermon is simple, simplistic, theologically unsophisticated, and self-centered—he is God incarnate for the benefit of this age, in line with the statement of the Bhagavadgītā, which says that God incarnates himself in every age, for the protection of the righteous, and the destruction of the wicked. ...Hindus will accept the words of an illiterate charismatic if there is a consensus that he is indeed a holy man, a seer. There is an oft-quoted Sanskrit saying which states that the guru is identical with Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva, the three most powerful deities of the Hindu pantheon, and by extension with the divine spirit.

Sathya Sai Baba, however, sometimes turns both of these specific traditional examples on their heads. Thus, he says:

The *Puranas* ['ancient' mythological traditions] and the ancient sages have declared that the Divine incarnates to punish the wicked and protect the good. This is not correct. The Divine incarnates to inculcate love in mankind and teach how love should be promoted and practised [(29-7-1988) S21 21:169].

This, in the terms I am using, is an ethicization of tradition. It is also an assertion of charismatic authority as defined by Weber: "It is written..., but I say unto you...". Similarly, following this pattern, Sathya Sai Baba elsewhere says:

You repeat the *shloka* [verse] ...usually interpreted as indicating that the *Guru* is Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara [Śiva] and that he is the visible *Parabrahma* [supreme spirit]. But, it is capable of a nobler interpretation: "Brahma is the *Guru*, Vishnu is the *Guru*, Maheshwara is the *Guru*, really *Parabrahma* is the *Guru*." Do not seek human *Gurus*, however great their reputation. They are not *gu* (*gunaatheetha*---beyond the *Gunas* ['qualities' of the world]... They are not *ru* (beyond Form)... Themselves limited, how can they communicate to you the Unlimited? Pray to the God within you.... Accept that as the *Guru*.... [(18-7-1970) S10 15:97]

This can hardly be called "simple", as Bharati would like (although it is perhaps simplistic); nor is it self-centred (although it might be seen as promoting self-centredness). Sathya Sai Baba's teachings are evidently more than merely a simplified "conservative" reiteration of traditional ideas.

²⁴ <http://www.saiguru.net/english/articles/o2guruaccused.htm> [19-2-2006].

Accordingly, Arvind Sharma (1986:224) slots the Sathya Sai Baba movement into a typology of ‘new Hindu religious movements’ as being merely ‘predominantly traditionally Hindu’ in orientation—a middle ground between those who ‘want to uphold the Hindu tradition’ [i.e. to ensure its dominance over Christianity and Islam], and those whose ‘membership is conspicuously foreign’. And Sathya Sai Baba’s ideas do include a small, but significant trace of “foreign” religious material—Bassuk (1987a:91), in his article ‘Six Modern Indian Avatars and the Ways They Understand Their Divinity’, calls attention to the fact that Sathya Sai Baba (and several similar figures) speak about their understandings of their divinity in specific ‘relation to Jesus Christ’.

This is certainly true, but Bassuk (1987a:89) portrays Sathya Sai Baba in this regard as claiming ‘that he is a reincarnation of Christ’, and this is somewhat misleading, for he himself quotes Sathya Sai Baba as putting words into the mouth of Jesus as follows: ‘He who sent me will come again’²⁵—the obvious implication being that Sathya Sai Baba wishes himself to be identified with God, rather than Jesus as such, or Jesus-as-God. Also of note in the views of Bassuk and Sharma is the fact that, whilst most of what I have thus far said of Sathya Sai Baba’s use of tradition has opposed this to ideas or instances of “innovation”, the question as to how “traditional” Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings might be has also been asked in respect to the issue of “modernity”. Much like the terms “innovation” and “tradition”, the term “modernity” can be, and has been, much problematized, but I will defer the task of defining what precisely I mean in using it until the end of Chapter 2. For now I will simply comment upon some uses that others have made of it in connection to Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings.

Leo Howe (1999:132) writes of the movement in Bali that it ‘claims to supply an essential corrective which brings Hinduism back into conformity with its original source’. But he elsewhere (2001:182-183,n18) concludes:

it is also seen as a modern form of worship, tailored to the demands of a fast-paced

²⁵ Cf. *John* 14:25-28; 15:26—also, 16:5-16: ‘Now I am going to him who sent me.... Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. ...I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. ...’ [NIVSB 1628]. NB These verses are understood by Christian interpreters to refer to the ‘Holy Spirit’ who is believed to have conferred divine blessings and insight upon the followers of Jesus after he had departed from them, but, interestingly—in light of Sathya Sai Baba’s reference to this passage—Mohammed, the prophet of Islam, also cites these verses in casting himself as the successor of Jesus by way of resemblance of his name (Ahmed) to that which is translated as ‘Counsellor’ here. Sathya Sai Baba, perhaps via one or more of his followers (cf. p.338 below), is perhaps casting himself as the ‘Spirit of truth’ (*satya* in Sanskrit means ‘truth’).

society and more in tune with new ideologies of individualism, democracy and personal achievement.

Similarly, Babb (1986:171,161) writes that ‘Sathya Sai Baba’s doctrines are basically an eclectic blend of elements drawn from a variety of well known philosophical and devotional traditions’, but he earlier states that:

There is indeed something new, or newish, about Sathya Sai Baba’s religious style. His personality resonates with the religious yearnings of the cosmopolitan and wealthy in a way that may not be unique, but is an impressive display of modernized saintliness.

Likewise, Hugh Urban (2003a:85) observes that:

If Sai Baba appears on the one hand to be a kind of icon of materialism and consumerism—the magic and fetishism of the commodity incarnate—he is also quite strikingly on the other hand one of the greatest critics of Western materialism and consumerism. He might be said to be, as one of his devotees put, one of our generation’s greatest ‘conservatives, a real traditionalist in an age in which experiments are going on’ ...and one of the most outspoken opponents of Westernisation and modernisation.

And Purushottama Bilimoria (1993:2) writes of Sathya Sai Baba:

Encountering the teacher and some of his activities, can be quite confusing, as he appears on the one hand to be the most traditionalist among traditionalist [*sic*], and on the other, the most modern among moderns.

Lastly, David Bowen (1985:509) writes that: ‘Modernity as a medium of expression, and as a source of metaphor in teaching, is characteristic of Baba’s discourses’. We will see the force of Bowen’s careful phrasing here to be borne out by the present study. Sathya Sai Baba certainly uses modernity as a medium of expression and as a source of metaphor (see, e.g., p.46), but that is all; as I will argue in Chapter 5, he is not, fundamentally, a modernist, and this goes some way towards explaining the ambivalent views that I have just outlined.

Over the course of this chapter, I have touched upon various scholarly studies of Sathya Sai Baba, but these have more to say that is of relevance to my focus. I will thus more thoroughly review them, and a number of other studies, in the next chapter. If nothing else, this exercise will serve to introduce some background information upon him and his avatar claims, “his story” as it were, providing a point of departure for my deeper foray into “his story and the history of avatar ideas” that is to follow. In this chapter, I have sought to justify this choice of topic, to explain my basic approach, and to define some of the key issues upon which I will be focussing—ideas of the avatar (“incarnation”) and of “innovation” (spiritualization, ethicization, charisma, tradition, modernity etc.).

2. STUDIES OF SATHYA SAI BABA

the Sai Power cannot be a subject for a university examination;
It is a subject for universal examination. Sai is limited only by His Own Will.
But when a near and dear relationship is established, one can delve a little deeper
into the Sai Mystery. That is the highest achievement possible.¹

As I have indicated, despite my having a few ‘near and dear’ encounters with Sathya Sai Baba, my study will, of necessity, be literature-based. Whatever Sathya Sai Baba may assert to the contrary—as in the passage quoted here—we have already seen, and will especially see in this chapter, that there are also some detailed academic papers that delve into the background of, or offer theories to account for, his divine persona—still more that refer to this persona in passing. I will proceed roughly chronologically in reviewing these studies, but will divide my treatment into four broad categories according to themes that I have noted.

Aside from the works of Haraldsson (discussed earlier), the earliest studies of Sathya Sai Baba seem to attempt to group him with other similar “saints” or religious leaders. Thus, Charles White (1972) characterizes Sathya Sai Baba as a “living saint” and seeks to situate him in a “Sāī Bābā Movement”. Agehananda Bharati (1970) makes a few glancing remarks about him as an exemplar of the “Hindu Renaissance”, and, in a second work (1981), refers to him in his presentation of “the cognitive and the conative constituents of Hinduism today”. Marvin Harper (1972) and Robert Elwood (1973) refer to him alongside other modern religious leaders who have become popular in America and H. Daniel Smith (1978) makes reference to him in his ‘notes on a minor iconographic tradition’. These studies, I will survey in the first section of this chapter.

One of the specific themes that emerges in this connection (and at which I have already hinted) is that of the relationship between traditional ideas of *advaita* (“non-dualism”) and Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings. I will thus refer also in this first section to the recent M.A. thesis by Greg Gerson (1998)—mentioned above—

¹ Sathya Sai Baba (1-8-1976) SSS10 53 NB Daniel Bassuk (1987b:89)—summarizing a devotee’s hagiographical account of Sathya Sai Baba—writes ‘Satya Sai Baba manifests what is known as ‘Sai Power’. This power is physical, psychic and spiritual, and there are outward manifestations of each. On the physical level he presents miracles... In the psychic realm Sai power produces telepathy, clairvoyance, and psychokinesis... In the spiritual domain Satya... performs ‘spiritual’ surgery and resurrects people from the dead’. What Bassuk’s source is here, I do not know (I suspect it might be V.K.Gokak (1975), but I have not checked up on this). Sathya Sai Baba himself—in his published speeches and writings at least—makes only two (other) references to ‘Sai Power’ or ‘Sai Shakthi’, portraying it as more-or-less equivalent to “omnipotence” [(22-11-1970) S10 35:235-236]. NB On Sathya Sai Baba’s general tendency to proclaim his incomprehensibility, see Section 1.3 above.

which focuses upon this (and another) theme in Sathya Sai Baba's teachings. In contrast to these works, Swallow and Babb (mentioned earlier) concentrate more closely upon Sathya Sai Baba himself—investigating something of the religious/sectarian/mythological background of his claim to be “Sai Baba”—and it is to their in-depth studies (along with some similarly focussed parts of works by David Bowen (1985) and Smriti Srinivas (1999b,2001), that I will devote most of the second section of this chapter.

The focus of the majority of academic studies of Sathya Sai Baba, especially in the last two decades, has been sociological—more upon his influence and following than on his personae or teachings. Thus: Raymond Lee (1982), Susan Ackerman and Lee (1988,1997), David Mearns (1995) and Alexandra Kent (1999,2000,2004,2005) present studies of Sathya Sai Baba groups in Malaysia; Donald Taylor (1984,1987), David Bowen (1985,1986), Frank Whaling (1987), and Bob Exon (1995,1997) write on some of Sathya Sai Baba's followers in the UK; Morton Klass (1991) studies the Sathya Sai Baba movement in Trinidad; Jody Marshall (1998) interviews a Canadian follower of Sathya Sai Baba; Lise McKean (1996), Smriti Srinivas (1999b,2001), and Hugh Urban (2003a), consider the socio-economic significance of Sathya Sai Baba's teachings and movement in India; Leo Howe (1999,2001) and Yadav Somvir (2004) investigate the movement in Bali; and Norris Palmer (2005) studies a Sathya Sai Baba Centre in California. I will review and discuss these studies (with a few exceptions, to which I have already referred or will refer elsewhere) in the third section of this chapter.

2.1 Shirdi Sai & Similar “Saints”

Those who worship Shirdi Sai have not understood Him and you too have not understood Me. It is only those who have understood both that can pronounce judgement, is it not?¹

Charles White (1972:866ff.) situates Sathya Sai Baba in a tradition that he refers to as ‘The Sāi Bābā Movement’. He sees the roots of this movement in the figures of Gorakh-nāth (12th century CE), Kabīr (15th century CE), and Dattātreyā (semi-legendary, Fig.7), its trunk as the Muslim *faqīr* Sāi Bābā² (d.1918), and its branches as this last figure’s disciples or imitators (into which category falls Sathya Sai Baba).



Fig.7 A Dattātreyā idol in Puttaparthi. The pose, right leg on left knee, common in his iconography, is echoed in that of Shirdi & Sathya Sai—see Fig.11.

White (1972:868-869) writes that this Sāi Bābā lived most of his life in the town of Shirdi, in Maharashtra (immediately North of Andhra Pradesh), and:

is one of the most popular saints among the masses in central India today...He kept a fire burning perpetually in a Dhuni [*dhūnī* = “hearth”].... His ritual practices included both Muslim *Namaz*³ (Arabic *Ṣalāt*) and Hindu prayers and offerings.

...Sāi Bābā established himself as a saint through the performance of miracles.... He used the ash from the *Dhuni* as a sacramental substance for the working of his miracles.... But in addition to sacred ash often exercised direct means such as multi-location, warnings, appearance in dreams, and other devices to aid his followers.... since his death... a fairly large complex of buildings, including hostels for pilgrims, has been erected near his tomb.

Sathya Sai Baba, as White (1972:873-874) notes, claims ‘to be Sāi Bābā incarnate’—to be a reincarnation of this figure⁴—and, whilst he writes that there is ‘no

¹ Sathya Sai Baba [1957], quoted in Sathyam-1 (10) 193

² NB As Antonio Rigopoulos (1993:5), author of a major academic monograph on Sāi Bābā of Shirdi, writes: ‘Sāi is a term of Persian origin, usually attributed to Muslim ascetics, meaning “holy one” or “saint.” Bābā... is a Hindi term attributed to respected seniors and holy men, and literally means “father.” ...*faqīr*... which literally means “a poor man,” is commonly applied to Muslim mendicants’.

³ Cf. Rigopoulos (1993:63), who cites a devotee’s observation that Shirdi Sai Baba ‘seldom performed the five Namazes and never was bending on the knees and rising, as most Moslems do’.

⁴ NB Whilst some devotees of Shirdi Sai are evidently convinced of the veracity of this claim, others strongly reject it. An anti-Sathya Sai Baba website quotes the *Mumbai Mirror* of January 11, 2006 as follows: ‘Claims by followers of Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi that he is a reincarnation of Sai Baba of Shirdi have enraged devotees of the latter. They have filed a suit in the court at Rahata, in Ahmadnagar district, asking the court to restrain people from making such claims’ (http://home.hetnet.nl/~ex_baba/engels/shortnews/Mumbai%20Mirror.htm [21-7-2006]). Sāi Bābā himself, however, seems to have tolerated a number of persons who took on his name while

discernable Muslim influence’ on Sathya Sai Baba, he sees a strong:

apparent relationship between the *Vibhūti* of the *Dhuni* of Shirdi Sāi Bābā and the produced *Vibhūti* of Sathya Sāi Bābā. ...the latter like the former is prized for its sacramental and healing qualities.

This is an obvious connection to make and (although White seems unaware of this) is supported by hagiographical accounts, which claim that early in his career Sathya Sai Baba told his followers that the *vibhūti* he was (magically) producing came from the sacred fire kept by his former incarnation at Shirdi⁵. Sathya Sai Baba’s materialisations of *vibhūti* thus form a direct link between the two Sais⁶. And there are other symbolic links of note also. Fig.11a (p.96) is one example of this: Sathya Sai Baba, we might say, was dressed to be (the new) Shirdi Sāi Bābā.

White (1972:867) connects Shirdi Sai, in turn, with Gorakhnāth—in whom he sees a similar combination of magical powers and Hindu-Muslim syncretism. He notes that a head of the [Hindu] ‘Nāthpanthi’ monastic orders of which he was the ‘chief director’ is known by the Muslim term ‘Pīr’ and, like a Muslim Pīr, was ‘supposed to give advice or intercede with God through the use of his “powers” on behalf of clients’. He also notes that some of the tombs of such leaders ‘were places of religious resort as are those of the Muslim saints, and that, as with Shirdi Sai, the focus of the Nāthpanthis’ religious life is a ‘hearth or *Dhuni* whereon a fire is kept perpetually burning’. Kevin Shepherd (2005:19) points out, however, that ‘such fires were also favoured by Muslim *faqirs*’, and that ‘although Nathism did assimilate some Muslim *faqirs*, Sai Baba was not typical of Nath attitudes’.

Shepherd cites in particular Shirdi Sai discouraging ‘the practice of *pranayama* (breath control), which is favoured amongst the Naths’. But perhaps his reason for discouraging this was due to his own (Nāth influenced) experience with this practice. Indeed, whilst Shepherd sees traditional accounts of Shirdi Sai Baba engaging in ‘extreme Yogic exercises’ [characteristic of the Nāths] as being ‘exotic... suspect... hagiological components’, Antonio Rigopoulos (1993:47) opines that:

The hagiographic character of the narrative when it indulges in such details (following a typical scheme, as in the case of great yogins) does not diminish the general impression of an assiduous practice of *haṭha-yoga* on Baba’s part, repositing the hypothesis of a training in which Nātha influences might have played a role.

he was alive (see <http://www.shirdi-saibaba.com/saibababooks/saibabaambrosia/saibabaambrosia101.asp> [10-10-2006]), and, since his passing, a number of his devotees have embraced Sathya Sai Baba as his successor (see, e.g., the hagiographical account of R.T.Kakade and A.V.Rao (1985)).

⁵ E.g. SSSA 22.

⁶ Palmer (2005:100) also notes this.

Likewise, whilst Shepherd (2005:44) belittles any association between Shirdi Sai and Dattātreya (Fig.7 above)—pointing out that similar associations were ‘applied to fairly numerous holy men in nineteenth century



Fig.8

White (1972:867,870) sees Dattātreya as ‘a deified early ascetic’, who—like Shirdi Sai Baba—is reputed to have had ‘miraculous

powers’⁷, and he goes on to suggest another connection: ‘dogs, which iconographically accompany Dattātreya or figure in the Kabīr legends, find their counterparts in the iconography of Sāī Bābā’. This proves to be an interesting observation on White’s part—for, unbeknownst to him, Sathya Sai Baba is also sometimes depicted with dogs (Fig.8)⁸, more than once having kept these animals (more commonly lowly regarded in India) as pets⁹. Furthermore, on occasion he even explicitly identifies himself with Dattātreya—as for instance in his reported magical production of a ‘photograph’ of himself in the guise of this figure (Fig.9)¹⁰.

White (1972:869) also notes that Shirdi Sai Baba ‘sometimes spoke of himself as a reincarnation of Kabir’, and points out that he often used the [Arabic] term ‘*Fakīr*’ [commonly applied to Muslim religious mendicants] in reference to God in a manner analogous to Kabīr’s use of the [Sanskrit] term ‘*Guru*’. He also finds similarities in ‘both saints having Muslim and Hindu devotees, their humble life style, and their somewhat acerbic actions or teachings’. Again, Shepherd (2005: 18-9) seeks to minimize the importance of this, but in so doing he contradicts himself—he argues that, in aligning himself with Kabīr, Shirdi ‘Sai Baba was referring to his liberal interreligious approach’, but at the same time (albeit with some justification) portrays Shirdi Sai Baba as being ‘identified by all as a Muslim’ and as considering it as ‘no loss to Islam but only to Hinduism’ if Hindus came to worship him in the dilapidated mosque in which he resided. Moreover, Rigopoulos



Fig.9 A (supposedly) magically produced “photograph”, shown here by Sathya Sai Baba, of himself in the form of Dattātreya.

⁷ NB Daniélou (1964:183) presents Dattātreya as an avatar of ‘magic’—noting a tradition that he was ‘the originator of the Tantras’—and references some purāṇic accounts which mention him.

⁸ NB For more examples, see LIMF 193,269-71.

⁹ See, e.g., Aitken (2004), p.178.

¹⁰ See B.N. Narasimha Murthy (2005), pp.105-106; Cf. Sathyam-3 14:245.

(1993:15ff.), in his in-depth study of Shirdi Sai Baba, lists many parallels between Shirdi Sai Baba and Kabīr, including ‘various utterances attributed to Baba, in which he connects and sometimes identifies himself with Kabir’. If these references are spurious, they are a product of traditional hagiological, rather than, as Shepherd would have it, Western scholarly, fabrication¹¹.

Rigopoulos also uncovers a number of additional parallels between Shirdi Sai Baba and Dattātreyā, and notes that popular belief even ‘identifies Sai Baba with an *avatāra* of Dattatreyā’. He further notes that the prologue of Shirdi Sai Baba’s official biography ‘*Shri Sai Satcharita*’ speaks of: ‘the well-known Marathi work... *Gurucharitra*... [(c.1500 CE), which] is read and studied daily by all the devotees of the God Dattatreyā all over the country’, and that, indeed, ‘the *Shri Sai Satcharita* is often called “the modern *Gurucharitra*”’. Rigopoulos (1993:262, 269) later notes that Sāi Bābā was evidently familiar with this text himself, and goes on to outline its subject matter as follows:

Much of the *Gurucharitra* (chap. 11-51) concerns the miraculous life story of Nara-simha Sarasvatī (c.1378-1458)... founder of Dattatreyā’s cult. The text also presents the life of Shripad Shrivallabha (c.1323-53)... viewed as the first *avatāra* of Datta’.

Rigopoulos does not make any detailed reference to this work, but I would note that Chapter XXIX of this work describes ‘The Great Power of Bhasma (Vibuthi)’—through contact with which even demons are said to be able to achieve spiritual liberation. Indeed, throughout this work sacred ash is used by the avatars of Dattātreyā for purposes similar to those for which both Sai Baba’s use(d) this substance—it is smeared on the forehead and/or sprinkled on the body of devotees to cure a variety of illnesses, and is believed to give knowledge when ingested¹².

Rigopoulos (1993:16) further writes that: ‘An important hagiographic treatment on Kabir’s life is found in ‘the *Bhaktavijaya* of Mahipati (1715-90)’, although, again, he makes little reference to this work—despite its obvious potential relevance to Sāi Bābā in that it was (originally) written in Marathi, the language of Maharashtra. This work is in part based on an earlier account, the *Bhaktamāla* of

¹¹ NB In addition to these, I might note that Western scholarship quite unconcerned with Sai Baba of Shirdi ties Kabīr to the Nāths, and to Sufism—the influence of which upon Shirdi Sai Baba is undeniable. Thus, Charlotte Vaudeville (1993:77,83) suggests of Kabīr that ‘it is very likely that his own ancestral tradition was a form of Nāthism’, and she notes that ‘Sufi preaching had spread all over Northern India in Kabīr’s time, ...had impregnated the whole composite culture of that time’.

¹² See: <http://www.shirdi-sai-baba.com/saibababooks/saibabagurucharitra/saibabagurucharitra30.asp>; <http://www.saibaba.ws/download/Dattatreyā.doc> [15-3-2007] NB This work also attributes *vibhūti* with the power of granting spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*), and the understandings of Sathya Sai Baba’s devotees parallel this—they sing that it ‘bestows Salvation’ (*mokṣa pradātam*) SBM 45.

Nabhadās, which White (1972:865,n.8) cites as being an important source on ‘the identification of actual persons with the incarnations of [the deity] Viṣṇu’, but neither White nor Rigopoulos note the important fact that this work identifies Kabīr as an avatar—in particular of Śuka¹³, the principal narrator of the most famous account of the avatars of Viṣṇu, the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* (c. 9th-10th century CE).

White (1972:870) does note of Shirdi Sai Baba that ‘his followers consider him to be the main incarnation of God in this age’, and he implies (1972:867) that this may be foreshadowed by the fact that Dattātreya ‘in the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*... is mentioned as the sixth incarnation of Viṣṇu’. He does not, however, note the potential echoes of these facts that we have seen in the ideas of Sathya Sai Baba. White (1972:863-866) does list the idea of “incarnation” (avatar) as a traditional religious role of some significance for these figures, but he concludes that it is largely interchangeable with the category of ‘saint’ in combining the traditional roles of ‘guru’ and ‘ascetic’—i.e. teaching and performing miracles or giving blessings. And, like Babb and Elwood above (indeed, like most scholars), White (1972:873-874) portrays the latter two of these functions as being most important for an understanding of Sathya Sai Baba.

White (1972:878) takes Agehananda Bharati (1970:283) to task for presuming that Sathya Sai Baba’s reputation for miracles is merely a testament to: ‘The seemingly boundless gullibility of the modern devotee’, and he finds cause to dispute several of Bharati’s conclusions on the general historical context of figures like Sathya Sai Baba. Bharati (1970:272) associates such figures with an ‘anti-scholarly and anti-intellectual’ ‘Hindu Renaissance’ (a term which he adopts with deliberate irony)¹⁴, but White (1972:876) argues that, on the contrary, the figures in his study, and other similar figures ‘made a distinctive intellectual contribution’. In this, he is somewhat at cross-purposes with Bharati—whose point is more that ‘the agents of the Renaissance look at indigenous scholars with considerable suspicion’¹⁵—but Sathya Sai Baba clearly does not fit Bharati’s characterization.

¹³ J. Abbott & N. Godbole (1933), p.5.

¹⁴ NB Kamakhya Choudhary (1981:79) writes that ‘the renaissance in India was characterised primarily by religious reawakening, whereas the renaissance in Europe was mainly intellectual.... In the European renaissance the stress was not on the revival of the conclusions arrived at by Plato, Aristotle, or Cicero, but on the incorporation of the Hellenic spirit of free intellectual enquiry’. Bharati’s point is perhaps that such a spirit did also exist in certain ancient Indian philosophical traditions, and still does exist to a certain extent at ‘grassroots’ level, but that this spirit is not what has been revived in the current ‘renaissance’—which has more of a fundamentalist religious character, often seeking to revive the conclusions, rather than the spirit, of the Vedas and Upaniṣads.

¹⁵ NB The real issue, which White (1972:877-878) later picks up on, is Bharati’s obviously problem-

Bharati (1970:272) supports his claim with reference to the popular guru Sivananda (1887-1963), who he quotes as follows:

Pedantry (vain display of learning) is a special attribute of some Sanskrit scholars... the son of an orthodox Shastri... a bookworm that lives in a small well... will talk of high philosophy and quote scriptures. But, his mind is full of vāsanās (desires).

In contrast to this, Sathya Sai Baba speaks of traditional scholars with respect, urging his followers to have:

contact with scholars and those who have experience in spiritual practice, like these pandits here. Listen to them; revolve their teachings in the depths of your memory; practise what they advise; yield gladly to their guidance [S5 20:112 (29-3-1965)].

Moreover, Harper (1972:89) cites Sathya Sai Baba as claiming a mission including ‘*Vidwathposhana* (Fostering of Scholarship)’, and ‘*Vedasamrakshana* (Preservation of the Vedas¹⁶)’—these, as we will see, being traditional tasks of the avatar.

Whilst it is also true that, at least so far as his presentation of himself as an avatar is concerned, Sathya Sai Baba sometimes does make strong anti-intellectual pronouncements—as for example at the head of this chapter¹⁷—these usually criticize modern, rather than traditional scholarship. Perhaps Sathya Sai Baba ought not to be aligned with the “Hindu Renaissance” at all? Certainly, a further claim by Bharati (1970:269), that ‘Not only do speakers for the Renaissance not study Sanskrit, but they overtly or covertly discourage followers from doing so’, does not apply to Sathya Sai Baba—for Harper (1972:94) notes that he founded:

a school at Prasanthi Nilayam in which young boys are taught to chant the Vedas by heart... [and an] All India Academy of Vedic Scholars, established in 1965 when two hundred pundits responded to Sathya Sai’s invitation and assembled in a great convocation.

The study of Sanskrit is also compulsory in the schools and universities that he has since founded, and he encourages his official organisation to teach Sanskrit to its members¹⁸. He also once himself addressed a large audience in Sanskrit¹⁹.

Furthermore, Sathya Sai Baba has regularly encouraged the performance of vedic sacrificial rituals—most recently (in 2006 and 2007) the ‘Ati Rudra Maha Ya-

atic definition of “indigenous” or “grassroots scholars” as somehow excluding anyone with modern or English language influences—it is unlikely, as White points out, that such figures ‘exist anymore in complete isolation from all modern influences’. White also points out some hostility underlying Bharati’s views: ‘what Bharati does not like is *Renaissance*. What he likes is *grassroots*!’

¹⁶ NB On the Vedas, the earliest traditional “revealed” religious works, see Chapter 4 below.

¹⁷ See also p.55—cf. p.292, where he raises Pundits to a status approximating his own.

¹⁸ See Sathya Sai Baba (18-5-1968 [morning]) S8 20:106.

¹⁹ LG 264 NB Anil Kumar notes that Sathya Sai Baba has also composed a number of original verses in Sanskrit (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/saidevotees_worldnet/message/2061 [10-5-2007]).



Fig.10 Sathya Sai Baba’s “fostering” of traditional vedic practices—the “Ati Rudra Maha Yajna”, an eleven-day traditional ritual fire-sacrifice held in the Sai Kulwant Hall in Prashanthi Nilayam in August 2006. Priests trained in vedic chanting and ritual, make offerings into sacrificial fire-pits. Devotees claim that this sacrifice involves the greatest number of vedic priests ever assembled. The ritual was subsequently repeated, with Sathya Sai Baba’s attendance as presiding deity (said to be necessary for its performance), in Chennai in January 2007.

jna’ (Fig.10) (“Great sacrifice to the Supreme Rudra (Śiva)”)—which, interestingly from our point of view, is integrally linked to Sathya Sai Baba’s divine persona. An invitation to attend the first of these *yajñas* (sent to all members of the saidevotees_worldnet internet forum) claims that a ritual of this type:

has been performed only once before by Shiva for the Good of the World, Now it is performed by Sai Shiva. ...This Great Maha Rudra Yagnam brings together the Most Scholarly Vedic pandits ever Assembled anywhere in the world, Never have so many Vedic Scholars are going to [sic] assemble in a single place.... Major Portions of All the Four Vedas have to be recited everyday during all the 12 days.... This Is not done in any other of the Yagnas.... This is the Only Yagna which MUST HAVE a Divine Personality as Its KARTA or the Head of the Yagna, This Yagna cannot be done without Divinity as Its KARTA, This is a must for this Yagna....²⁰

And more such *yajñas* are planned—this is not some temporary concession on Sathya Sai Baba’s part to the wishes of his devotees—Sathya Sai Baba’s divine identity will be of practical import to his followers for some time to come.

Whilst Bharati (1970:274) does not mention ideas of the avatar as being of any importance to the Hindu Renaissance, he does note that the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, the most famous traditional exposition of avatar ideas, occupies a central place, and this is true of Sathya Sai Baba. Bharati claims, however, that ‘the informed Hindu must contest the *Bhagavad-Gītā*’s renaissance status: it is not canonical like the Vedas or the Upanisads: it is *smṛti* [‘remembered’], belonging to a category of texts the acceptance of which is not incumbent upon the Hindu’. And this is problematic, for Sathya Sai Baba classes the *Bhagavad-Gītā* along with the Vedas and Upaniṣads as *śruti* (i.e. revelation)²¹ and this is a thoroughly traditional view—as White (1972:878) points out, the *Bhagavad-Gītā* was ‘important in ancient times... and ...was often afforded the status of *Śruti* even though it was not technically so’.

In a further contrast to Bharati, Harper (1972:90), writing at around the same time as White, was the first to explicitly note Sathya Sai Baba’s ‘awareness of being an *avatara*’, writing that (as exemplified earlier, p.46) ‘he speaks with a disarming lack of embarrassment about himself and his deeds as a supernatural person’. He compares Sathya Sai Baba in this regard with Sai Baba of Shirdi, but also especially with Meher Baba (1894-1969)—who, as he later says (1972:54), ‘explicitly declared himself to be “the Avatar for this age”’. Harper (1972:65) goes on to write, however, that for Meher Baba, at least:

the disciple as well as the Avatara is God. Man must awaken from his ignorance and

²⁰ http://groups.yahoo.com/group/saidevotees_worldnet/message/1903 [10-5-2007]

²¹ See, e.g. SuV 1.

try to comprehend the fact that not only is the Avatara God, but man, the ant, and the sparrow are nothing but God.

And, as we have seen, Sathya Sai Baba too tells his devotees: ‘All of you are embodiments of the Divine. Recognize this fact and strengthen this feeling within you. The idea that God is different from you should be given up’²².

As a background for understanding such claims, Harper (1972:10-12) reiterates that an important strand of the underlying philosophy espoused by such figures can be traced back to the famous saint Śaṅkara (c.8th century CE), for whom:

The absolute reality is Brahman [God], and there is no other reality... Those who are ignorant of the true nature of reality believe the world to be real, but the wise who can see through the illusion realize that Brahman is the only reality... The *Advaita* (“unqualified monism”) of Shankara rejects all distinctions between objects and objects, the subject and the object, the Self and Brahman as unreal and illusory.

We have already seen Sathya Sai Baba promoting some ideas similar to these, and indeed Harper (1972:91) relates a story told by Sathya Sai Baba which concludes: ‘only Brahman exists. Neither “you” nor “I” exist in the ultimate sense’.

Greg Gerson (1998:61-62) goes into some depth on Sathya Sai Baba’s use of *advaita* ideas, characterizing the basic principles of *advaita* in a similar fashion to Harper above, and explicitly making the point that ‘at the highest nondualistic level, a “personal” God... is also illusory, as this is only a concept which exists in relation to the evanescent matter and time-bound universe’. He also notes, however, that *advaita* does allow at least a preliminary place for dualistic conceptions of, and devotion towards traditional deities:

It is only the most advanced students who are able to transcend the duality of name and form to the extent that they can comprehend the unmanifest Godhead.... [T]he path of devotion is often recommended until wisdom ripens. In fact, Shankara himself composed hymns in praise of traditional Hindu gods such as the forms of the Divine Mother, Siva and Vishnu. Yet, even in these hymns, he emphasized that these gods are simply concrete representations of the transcendent Brahman.

In consonance with this, as Gerson (1998:78) goes on to show, Sathya Sai Baba at times also takes this view, saying, for example:

By slow stages, you will find that particular form [which you have chosen for worship] enclosing all beings and therefore assuming a Universal nature. It will gradually drop its boundaries of time and space and like the blueness of Krishna, pervade the sky and sea and become a symbol for the depth of eternity.

I will have more to say about this later (p.201). Gerson (1998:59) further notes that Sathya Sai Baba is evidently well aware of the teachings of Śaṅkara, for one

²² (28-3-1996) <http://sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume29/ss29-o8.pdf> [14-6-2007]

whole volume of his collected speeches focuses on this figure (see p.240 below)²³. Gerson (1998:13-14) also acknowledges the importance of Sathya Sai Baba’s identity as an avatar, but has little to add to what we have already seen, merely giving a couple of paraphrases of academic and hagiographical views on this subject

On traditional views of the avatar in this context, Harper (1972:26) writes:

As conceived in its contact with finite man, the Absolute is Ishvara, Brahman saguna (Brahman “with attributes”), who “descends” to man as an avatara.... Although the term *avatāra* is often rendered into English as “incarnation,” some Hindu scholars strongly deny that the “descent” of the deity is a true incarnation.²⁴ For them the term *avatāra* implies that “the Supreme Lord appeared in this world in His own Eternal Form out of His Own Inconceivable Prerogative without accepting any physical body.”

Interestingly, he goes on to say that: ‘The adherents of the contemporary personality cults... do not agree entirely with this point of view.... The founders of their cults... manifest certain human as well as divine qualities’. Odd as it may seem, Sathya Sai Baba’s views present parallels to both of these viewpoints. I will return to this issue later (see Chapter 6).

The main point of Harper’s study is to understand the attraction of figures like Sathya Sai Baba to their American devotees, and, in accordance with what we saw in Section 1.4, over and above his “miracles”, it is Sathya Sai Baba’s divine persona that emerges as the key factor in this. Harper (1972:237) quotes one American devotee as saying of Sathya Sai Baba: ‘He is sage, father, mother, child. ...Never have I stood so close to God’, and tells of another couple who were drawn to Sathya Sai Baba after ‘they prayed “for the Highest Living Master to come and take us to our goal.”’²⁵ Robert Elwood (1973:245), in a similar study, also makes this point—he says that, whilst Sathya Sai Baba has never been to the United States, this is not entirely necessary, because of his status as ‘an *avatar*, a divine incarnation, of Krishna, and of Shiva and his *shakti* or consort... to whom distance and natural law mean little.’

Finally, on a different note, Morton Klass (1991:77) suggests that: ‘Though Sathya Sai Baba claims to be the reincarnation of the “Saint of Shirdi [sic]” he has made no effort to look like the latter, or to behave in ways attributed to the older

²³ Bowen (1985:484,509) also notes Sathya Sai Baba’s affinity for *advaita*, giving some references to Sathya Sai Baba literature in this regard.

²⁴ NB Western scholars have also made this point—see, e.g., p.12 above.

²⁵ NB Sathya Sai Baba’s divine persona is also a major theme of several short documentary films that were made in the 1970s and early 1980s by American film-maker Richard Bock (see Bibliography), these often serving as tools of recruitment to the cult in the West [see also S. Ruhela (1985:95)].

holy man’ (excepting the parallel usages of *vibhūti* that we saw above). There are, however, many photographs of a young Sathya Sai Baba in a pose (Fig.11a)²⁶ imitative of characteristic depictions of his namesake (Fig.11b)—these, in turn, being imitative of icons of Dattātreya (e.g. Fig.6 above)²⁷. And one of the early Western devotees of Sathya Sai Baba recalls seeing two self-portraits that Sathya Sai Baba had painted when he was in his late teens, one of which was in the guise of Shirdi Sai Baba. Sathya Sai Baba evidently concluded that they were ‘Not good’, and despite protests of devotees to the contrary, had them both destroyed²⁸.



Fig.11a An early photograph of Sathya Sai Baba in a pose and with a walking-cane reminiscent of Sai Baba of Shirdi.

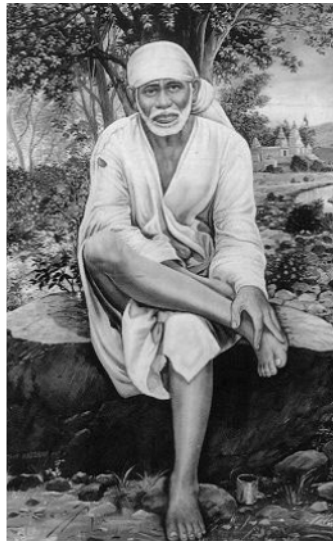


Fig.11b A typical painting of Sai Baba of Shirdi (d.1918) in his characteristic pose—right leg resting on the left knee.



Fig.11c Two Sais—the Shirdi Sai idol (at front) is said to have miraculously appeared.

Still, it is true that, as H. Daniel Smith (1978:57) writes: ‘It is surprising how rarely a picture of the earlier Shirdi Sai Baba appears as part of the paraphernalia presented with Satya Sai Baba’. And the reason for this perhaps lies in the fact that, as we have seen, Sathya Sai Baba, in addition to claiming identity with Shirdi Sai, has long claimed to be “the avatar”—an identity that provides him, and his devotees, with a vast fund of alternative symbols out of which to fashion devotional “paraphernalia”. Moreover, as we will see in the next section, even his first claim to identity with Shirdi Sai Baba invoked other significant religious figures.

²⁶ NB For more examples of Sathya Sai Baba in this pose, see LIMF 164,192,197,200,202,248.

²⁷ NB For some other (non-Sathya Sai Baba-aligned) examples of Dattātreya in the pose exemplified in this image, see: <http://www.sivanandabrasil.com.br/images/dattatreya.jpg>; <http://www.advaita.it/images/Dattatreya1.jpg>; <http://www.kamat.com/indica/faiths/gods/13040.jpg> [28-5-2007].

²⁸ GC 86

2.2 Becoming Baba; Bharadvāja

I belong to Apasthamba Suthra; I am of the Bharadwaja Gothra;

I am Sai Baba.... Your Venkavadhoota prayed that I be born in your family; so, I came.¹

Sathya Sai Baba was born on the 23rd of November 1926² in Puttaparthi³, being named “Satyanārāyaṇa” after a deity worshiped by Easwaramma, his mother⁴. Babb (1987:171) writes, based upon his assessment of Sathya Sai Baba’s authorized biography, that, other than these somewhat trivial details of his origins, the ‘facts grade off into symbolism’. And, certainly, as we will see hereunder and throughout this study, this “biography” and its like (including Sathya Sai Baba’s own renditions of his story) much draw upon, or at least accord with, traditional religious paradigms. But, as I suggested in Section 1.1, looking beneath the surface features of these accounts, there are some significant “facts”, or at least “likely facts”, of Sathya Sai Baba’s background that can be ascertained.

Early in the second decade of his life, Sathya Sai Baba pronounced his identity, in terms akin to those cited at top here, with Sai Baba of Shirdi (who had passed away some 20 years previously). Deborah Swallow (1982:135) explains this claim in terms of the symbolic heritage (especially ‘Saivite’, I will discuss this later) that it supposedly enabled Sathya Sai Baba to access, suggesting his purpose to be that of gaining ‘respectability and authority’. This, however, is problematic. His authorized biography presents a view, echoed by Babb (1986:163), that, at the time of his initial claim, ‘Sai Baba [of Shirdi] was unknown’ in the local environs⁵, and Sathya Sai Baba has at times himself propagated this view. He even claims that this ‘proves’ his identity with Sai Baba of Shirdi—for how otherwise, he argues, could a 10 year old boy know of this figure when ‘nobody in this part of the South

¹ Sathya Sai Baba (23-5-1940) Sathyam-1 (5) 38

² Cf. p.338,n.41 below.

³ This according to his authorized biography—on which see pp.15ff. below. It is possible that Sathya Sai Baba was in fact born in his mother’s family home in a neighbouring village (see, e.g., <http://saibabaexposed.blogspot.com/2006/11/truth-about-sai-babas-birthplace.html> [3-1-2007]).

⁴ NB N.Kasturi, Sathya Sai Baba’s official biographer, notes that: ‘The Sathya Narayana cult ...had become popular in the region. It had spread wide in Maharashtra (where Shirdi is) and migrated from there to Andhra, Orissa and other states’ (ECM 17). See Edward B. Harper (1964:184) for a description of some of the details of Satyanārāyaṇa rituals undertaken in a South Indian home. Bruce Tapper (1987:104) notes that: ‘People make a vow to perform this ceremony upon the successful occurrence or completion of a desired event, usually associated with family well-being, such as the performance of a wedding or the birth of a son’, but he gives a traditional story in which the ritual was evidently performed in order to enable a king to have children, so this may have been Easwaramma’s intention in her performances of this ritual.

⁵ Sathyam-1 (6) 46

had known or even heard of Shirdi Baba’?⁶ If this was indeed the case, his claiming identity with Sai Baba of Shirdi can hardly be thought to be something that would increase his ‘respectability and authority’. Indeed, his family’s initial response to his (admittedly somewhat bizarre, see below) process of identifying himself with this figure was to seek help for him from doctors and exorcists.

The recent devotional “biography” of Sathya Sai Baba, *Love is My Form* (Padmanaban, 2000:101-111) reports ‘no change’ in response to medical treatment, and describes several torturous, but ineffective, exorcism attempts. Padmanaban (2000:117) further complicates matters by noting, contrary to the above, that two uncles of the young ‘Raju’ (as Sathya Sai Baba was then most commonly known) ‘were worshippers of Sai Baba of Shirdi, long before Raju announced himself as being ‘that’ Sai Baba’. He notes that the young Sathya used to attend regular readings of the life story of Shirdi Sai Baba that were held at their houses, and this would seem to be a more believable context (from an ordinary perspective) from which Sathya Sai Baba might have made his claim. But Padmanaban goes on to inform us that young Sathya is supposed to have amazed all present at these readings by his precise and encyclopaedic knowledge of this particular work.

This last feat might perhaps be explained by merely attributing an extraordinarily accurate and efficient memory to the young Sathya, but many of his other early associations of himself with Shirdi Sai Baba involved similar, or even more astounding “miracles” (e.g. Fig.11c above)⁷. In facilitating his claim to be a reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba, Sathya Sai Baba also innovates, generating charismatic authority by going against the recorded words of Shirdi Sai Baba—having him say that he would reappear after eight years, instead of as the eight-year-old boy predicted by the written record of this prophecy⁸. And, even when his parents and family accepted his claim, there were many others who did not. Sathya Sai Baba’s most recent biographer Bill Aitken (2004:146) contrasts the ‘centuries of rancorous argument before sophisticated churchmen could arrive at a formula to describe the grandeur of Christ’s being’ with ‘the immediate acknowledgement of divinity by the peasants of Rayalseema [*sic*, see p.281]. Certain of their own spiritual insights, they promptly accorded their young prophet full honour in his own land’.

⁶ GLI 9

⁷ E.g.: ‘he would often materialise not only pieces of the robe or kafni worn by Sai Baba of Shirdi, but also pictures of Him’ (LIMF 131, cf. 170-171); Sathyam-1 36, cf. Rigopoulos (1993), p.248ff. Cf. also <http://saibabaexposed.blogspot.com/2006/11/truth-about-sai-baba-rock.html> [26-12-2006].

⁸ Sathya Sai Baba (23-10-1961) S2 20:102, cf. Rigopoulos, (1993), p.246ff.

But Haraldsson (1997:127,119) notes the testimony of early devotees that many persons from Puttaparthi and the surrounding villages were not so easily won over, even going to the extent of throwing stones at him whenever he passed them in the religious processions his devotees would organize. Thus, whilst Sathya Sai Baba eventually did gain respectability in his home town, his identity as Shirdi Sai Baba did not figure prominently in this—at least not in the early stages of his mission, in which, as we will see in the next section, this identity was most prominent. By all accounts, this was no simple, calculated, claim to fame.

Sathya Sai Baba's claim to be born in the *gotra* of the sage Bharadvāja also presents us with something of an initial mystery. Swallow (1982:128) and Babb (1986:163) both follow Sathya Sai Baba's official biographer Kasturi (1969:47) in interpreting this reference to be an affiliation with 'the Spiritual Lineage of Bharadvaja'. But, whilst, as we will see, they are not necessarily wrong in this, the concept of *gotra* originally referred to biological, rather than spiritual descent⁹, and something of this sense persists into recent times—P.V.Kane (1968:2.484) writes that: 'When a person says 'I am Jamadagni-gotra' he means that he traces his decent from the ancient sage Jamadagni by unbroken male descent'. David Bowen (1985:485) correctly states that a *gotra* is defined as an 'exogamous group within a caste descended from some male ancestor', but his application of this fact to Sathya Sai Baba's claim also proves to be somewhat misleading. Bowen (1985:139-140) notes the fact that, by birth, 'Baba's lineage was not of the ritually most exalted, the priestly, caste'¹⁰, and writes that:

Bharadvaj, one of the revered seven sages of Hindu mythology... is ...one of the authors of the Vedic hymns.... Two of his daughters became intimately related to Vedic gods.... His own father, Brhaspati, was divine—supreme deity of intellectual powers, priest and teacher of the gods.... By a single deft allusion, therefore, Sathya Sai Baba laid claim to a lineage for himself of the most exalted order.

But all the *ṛṣis* are highly exalted figures—most of them of divine parentage—and thousands, if not millions, of persons trace their descent from Bharadvāja. Whilst Swallow (1982:136) similarly suggests that the above-mentioned claim 'establishes Sathya Sai Baba in a line of spiritual succession in a Brahman *gotra*, thus indirectly asserting his Brahman status despite his non-Brahman origins', we must note that

⁹ NB For an introduction to the *gotra*-system see p.V.Kane, *History of Dharmashastra*, II, Part 1 (1968-), pp.479ff. For some further details of the origins and development of the *gotras*, see D.D. Kosambi (2002), pp.98ff.

¹⁰ NB Bowen does note, however, that 'A wrong attribution of priestly rank to the family has been made by some [cf., e.g., the assertion of Bharati (1981a) quoted p.77 above].

this concept is not limited to the Brahmin (priestly) caste, being intended to regulate the marriage alliances of all castes¹¹. At an early stage the *gotra* system did come to be monopolized by Brahmins, who were perhaps the only caste sufficiently interested or able to, memorize records of the details of such. And it was often the case that *kṣatriya* (warrior) and *vaiśya* (merchant) castes were merely enjoined to adopt the *gotra* of their family priest. But the concept applied to these other castes nonetheless.

H.H.Risley (1903:86) notes of one group of *kṣatriyas* employing the *gotras*:

The “*Gotras*,” unlike those of the Brāhmins, do not indicate that a family included in any one of them is the descendent of the particular *Rishi* whose name it bears, but the member of the *Gotra* claim to be merely disciples of the eponymous *Rishi*.

This is the type of understanding that we saw Babb and Swallow presenting above, but it certainly cannot be said that the *kṣatriyas* here are claiming the status of Brahmins. Even in some cases in which lower castes (who previously had not employed the *gotra* system) specifically claim biological affiliation with a Brahmin *gotra*, they evidently do not understand this as a claim to Brahmin status—although such claims no doubt did enhance their general social standing¹².

Swallow (1982:125) and Babb (1986:163,n4) refer to the encyclopaedic ethnography of Thurston and Rangachari (1909:4.247ff.) in noting respectively that Sathya Sai Baba’s caste, the Rājus, ‘say they are *Ksatriyas*’ and that some of them ‘have adopted the Brahmanical *gotra* system’. But they make little light of this information, Babb concluding that ‘the relevance of this to Sathya Sai Baba’s claim is not clear’. Had they dug a little deeper into this source, however, they would have discovered that Thurston and Rangachari (1909:1.223,224) list ‘Bharadwāja’ as a *gotra* of the ‘Bhatrājus’, also known as the ‘Bhatrājus’, and generally known as the ‘Rājus’—a name which is said to come from their being ‘the offspring of a Kshatriya¹³ female by a Vaisya male’. Further information clearly aligns Sathya Sai Baba with this caste, rather than the caste of Rājus (a.k.a. Rāzus¹⁴) to which Babb and Swallow refer. Thurston and Rangachari (1909:1.223) note the Bhatrājus [*bhatrājulu* in Telugu] to be a Telugu speaking caste of ‘musicians and ballad-reciters’, and this accords with Swallow’s (1982:127) observation that, according to

¹¹ This, and the following, comes from Kane Vol.II, Part 1 (1968-), pp.493-494. WIDTH

¹² See, e.g., John Michener (1982), pp.81-82.

¹³ The linkage here is presumably through the Sanskrit term *rājā*, “king”. NB On the Bhatrājus, see also http://www.bhatrajuvedika.com/bhatraju_clan.html [16-7-2007]

¹⁴ NB ‘z’ and ‘j’ seem to be used interchangeably in many instances by Thurston and Rangachari, presumably due to the fact that they sound (and in some Indian scripts look) similar.

Kasturi, ‘Sathya Sai Baba’s paternal grandfather was a locally renowned ‘master of music and the histrionic art’. Interestingly, in light of what we will see to be Sathya Sai Baba’s extensive knowledge of avatar traditions, Thurston and Rangachari (1909:1.224-225) observe that this caste is said to be ‘well versed in folklore’ and historical traditions. And significantly—in light of what I have noted to be Sathya Sai Baba’s prolific output of *ex tempore* speeches, and his propensity for innovation—they write that the Bhaṭṛājus are said to ‘have a wonderful faculty in speaking *improvisatore* on any subject proposed to them’.

Sathya Sai Baba himself connects this last faculty with his divine persona, saying on one occasion ‘I had no idea of speaking to you this evening, but of course, I need no preparation. My *Sankalpa* ([Divine] resolve) and its fulfilment are instantaneous’¹⁵. But it seems likely that this was originally a trait developed by his ancestors in the royal courts, for Madhao Patil (1999:162) notes that several of the rulers of the South Indian kingdom Vijayanagara—under the jurisdiction of which Puttaparthi once fell (see Fig.23, p.280 below):

took delight in listening to the compositions of their court poets... Often the king would tell them to compose an instant poem on a given situation so as to test their literary abilities.

Indeed, Thurston and Rangachari (1909:1.223-224) write that the Bhaṭṛājus ‘were originally attached to the courts of the Hindu princes as bards’, although: ‘Most of them are now cultivators, and only a few are ballad reciters’. Thurston and Rangachari (1909:1.228) also note that, with one exception, the Bhaṭṛājus are ‘the only non-Brāhman caste... [w]hich performs the duties of guru or religious instructor’. Sathya Sai Baba hence has no need to claim affiliation with a Brahmin *gotra*, something that all but completely refutes the above quoted suggestions of Bowen and Swallow to this effect¹⁶.

K.S. Singh (1998:423) notes some further general features of the Bhaṭṛāju caste, and these confirm Sathya Sai Baba’s membership thereof: ‘They are non-vegetarians’ (Sathya Sai Baba’s official biography tells of his struggles with his family over this issue—he is a staunch vegetarian¹⁷); ‘They use Raju as their title’ (we have seen some instances of this); and ‘They bury the dead’ (this is unusual in

¹⁵ (2-8-1958) S1 12:69

¹⁶ Cf., however, Haraldsson (1997), p.55.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Gerson (1998:9) NB Despite this, vegetarianism has generally not been a strong focus of Sathya Sai Baba’s movement—although a devotee recently reported the ‘happy news’ that ‘Puttaparthi police have banned selling chicken’ within a 9km radius of Sathya Sai Baba’s ashram ([http://groups.yahoo.com/group/saidevotees_worldnet/message/2074 [27-2-2007]).

India, but Sathya Sai Baba tells of his regular visits, on his birthday, to pay his respects at the tomb of his parents¹⁸, and a devotee reports that Sathya Sai Baba's brother was 'buried as is, as per family custom'¹⁹).

Singh writes that 'Bhatraju is derived from the words bhat, meaning lord and raju, meaning ruler', but this seems to be something of a folk-etymology—Monier-Williams' Sanskrit dictionary lists the word *bhaṭa*, from which Bhaṭ presumably derives, as meaning 'servant', and gives a verb *bhaṭayati* as meaning, 'to speak'. It would seem that the name thus comes from the fact that the Bhaṭrājus once served as reciters of genealogy and history for the Rāju (*kṣatriya*) caste that once ruled Puttaparthi²⁰. Indeed, Sathya Sai Baba's most recent biographer, Padmanaban (2000:24,n6)—aligning Sathya Sai Baba with the Bhaṭrājus—notes that 'A Bhat Raju was so called because he praised kings and royal personages with songs and poetry'. Padmanaban (2000:11) also suggests a derivation of this name from the caste being an offshoot of the Rājus which 'has long since abandoned its militant *Kshatriya* role and taken up interpreting and popularising sacred literature', but this is an (unacknowledged) quote from Kasturi (1989a:19), and seems to be something of an instance of "folk-ethnology" on the part of the latter. A similar case, involving folk-etymology, is that of Haraldsson (1997:55), who asserts that Sathya Sai Baba's family 'belonged to the Raju caste, a low caste whose duties in old India were to praise their king or raja by songs and poetry'; the (incorrect) implication being that Rāju somehow means "one who praises a 'Rājā'".

Haraldsson is also perhaps following Kasturi, and he goes on to note that Sathya Sai Baba's family name is 'Ratnakara' (i.e. "Ocean"). Singh (1996:1145) lists one of the few surnames used by the Bhaṭrājus as 'Ratnakaram', extra confirmation, if any is needed, that he belongs to this caste. Furthermore, Kasturi's (1989:19) description of day-to-day life in Sathya Sai Baba's family before he was born ties in with what we have just seen:

The home of the Ratnakaram Rajus was a hive of activity all day. The men were busy writing and rehearsing plays, setting poems to music and learning to play on many an instrument. ...over them all presided the patriarch Kondama Raju, the friend and guide, the sustenance and support of young and old who came from the villages around to fall at his feet and receive his patriarchal touch.

Sathya Sai Baba spent a lot of his time in his childhood with Kondama Raju (his

¹⁸ (19-11-1998) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume31/sss31-40.pdf> [27-3-2007]

¹⁹ Swami's_youngest_brother_dies.doc (28-10-2003, received via a personal communication).

²⁰ Cf. Sathyam-1 2-3.

grandfather), and—in some respects—has obviously filled, and greatly surpassed, the *guru*-like role played by this figure.

Sathya Sai Baba's other reference at the head of this section, that to 'Āpastamba Sūtra', is also perhaps simply a reflection of his ancestry. Babb (1986:163) quotes Sathya Sai Baba's official biographer Kasturi as interpreting this statement to mean 'the spiritual school of Sage Āpastamba', and notes that: 'Āpastamba is the putative author of an important body of *dharmashāstra*'. Swallow (1982:128) interprets this reference in a similar manner to Babb, and offers no additional hypotheses (i.e. other than the implication that Sathya Sai Baba might be claiming Brahmin status) as to the reason for it. But, as R.N. Dandekar (1979:349), writes:

The *sūtra* is an aphoristic statement - at once brief, unequivocal, comprehensive, generally valid, and expressive of the essential point. Presumably, the *sūtras* were originally intended to serve as lecture-notes for the teachers of the various schools.

Smriti Srinivas (1999b:93) does pick up on this, but sees Sathya Sai Baba's statement as 'a reference to the texts called the Brahma Sutras'. These, however, are traditionally attributed to a sage by the name of Bādarāyaṇa—not to Āpastamba. Babb's above-cited suggestion is also wide of the mark, for Dandekar (1979:356) writes that 'the *Dharmasastras* ...represent a later stage in the evolution of the literature on Dharma... than the *Dharmasūtras*', and there are, in any case, other types of *sūtra* attributed to Āpastamba also²¹.

From early times, these works became the exclusive province of Brahmins, and *sūtra*, as much as *gotra*, became a common genealogical referent²². It thus carries no implication of Sathya Sai Baba's being a Brahmin, and there is no evidence that any who might have heard Sathya Sai Baba's claim considered him to be a Brahmin as a consequence. Indeed, so far as his (later) divine persona, "the avatar", is concerned, there is no reason why this should have been necessary, for most of the traditional (and modern) "avatars" are of non-Brahmin extraction²³.

²¹ NB In fact, David Knipe points out that today, Brahmin students of the *Āpastamba-sūtra* only study the 'Śrauta Sūtra and a Gṛhya Sūtra as part of the corpus required for memorization and examination. The Dharma Sūtras and Dharma Śāstras are not part of the oral tradition but are read later on as written texts' (personal communication to me, 22 Oct 2004). Knipe refers for more detail to his "Becoming a Veda in the Godavari Delta," in *Festschrift for Frits Staal* [Leiden 1997].

²² David Knipe (personal communication, 22 Oct 2004).

²³ NB Sathya Sai Baba (as avatar) is more of a 'prophet' and/or a 'magician', than a 'priest'—Weber (1964:46) writes: 'It is no accident that almost no prophets have emerged from the priestly class. As a rule, the Indian teachers of salvation were not Brahmins... The priest... dispenses salvation by virtue of his office. Even in cases in which personal charisma may be involved, it is the hierarchical office that confers legitimate authority upon the priest as a member of a corporate enterprise of salvation. But the prophet, like the magician, exerts his power simply by virtue of his personal gifts'.

It is clear, then, that Sathya Sai Baba is no more claiming the status of a Brahmin than any other member of the *gotra*, or affiliate of the *sūtra*, to which he refers—it seems fair to assume that he is simply reciting his lineage. There is nothing particularly unusual about such a recitation, for Kane (1974:2.482) writes that ‘At the time of performing one’s daily *saṁdhyā* prayer, one has to repeat even in modern times one’s *gotra* and *pravara*, the *Vedaśākhā* and *sūtra* which one studies’. *Vedaśākhā* refers to the portion of the Veda which one’s family (-priest) studies, and *pravara* refers to the names of prominent rishis of one’s *gotra*, and this last fact perhaps gives us a clue as to the context of Sathya Sai Baba’s reference (at the beginning of this section) to ‘Venkavadhoota’ —who Kasturi cites Sathya Sai Baba’s father as claiming to have been their family’s ‘great ancestral sage who was looked upon as a Guru by hundreds of villages around’²⁴. Interestingly, Sai devotee Sathya Sai Shree Lakshmi (2005:65) notes that Venkavadhoota was famed for his miracles, and is posthumously worshipped by many to this day as an avatar. In more senses than one, Sathya Sai Baba’s current role “runs in his family”.

Why Sathya Sai Baba should have chosen to publicly recite his lineage at this juncture is unclear. Considered from the point of view of his being a (prospective) avatar it is perhaps not odd that his lineage should be recited, for the accounts of the major traditional avatars Rāma and Kṛṣṇa often begin with, or at least include, such lineages. So, for that matter, do those of Jesus and Buddha—the recapitulation of lineage perhaps being a universally important religious act. But we need not go so far as this—a devotee who, as it so happens, belongs to the same *gotra* and *sūtra* as Sathya Sai Baba, recollects his own experiences in this connection:

I was initiated into Gayathri Japa Mantra, during the sacred thread ceremony. The priest also taught me another mantra, which serves as an introduction of ourselves while paying obeisance to elders. It runs as under:

“Abhivaadhaye, Aangeerasa, Bharhasspathaya

Bharadwaja, Thraya Risheya, Pravaraanyutha

*Aapsthamba [sic] Suthra, **Bharadwaja Gothraha***

Yadhu saaka adhyayet, Srinivasa Sharma naama, Aham Asmibhoho”

Here, I, Srinivasan Sharma, identify myself before the elders to whom I am offering my Pranams, by tracing the lineage from and my origin to the Rishi Bharadwaj.²⁵

This portion of the *saṁdhyā* rite (following precisely the formula described by Kane above) evidently also serves as formal introduction of oneself to one’s elders.

²⁴ Sathyam-1 (5) 38

²⁵ http://saibaba.ws/teachings/hrudayanivasi/hrudayanivasi_samarppanam.htm [10-7-2007]

In stating his identity thus, Sathya Sai Baba was perhaps simply being polite, or perhaps ironic—for, in the face of opposition from his family (who had earlier attempted to have him exorcised to put an end to his unusual behaviour) he went on to introduce “himself” by the name of one of the deities worshipped by his uncles. Padmanaban (2000:114), however, notes of Sathya Sai Baba that: ‘Throughout the afternoon he kept repeating to himself, *“Bharadwaja Gothra, Apasthamba Suthra”*, so, obviously, the intended audience for this statement was not so much the other people present as Sathya Sai Baba himself. I would suggest that he was in the throes of an identity crisis—a profound questioning of his basic identity, which, combined with some powerful devotional and/or ecstatic experiences (see Section 4.5), led him to identify himself with Sai Baba of Shirdi.

Swallow (1982:129) concludes in this regard that this claim of Sathya Sai Baba’s is equivalent to one in which ‘the traditional renouncer rejects the world and breaks his ties with family, caste and village’. And Padmanaban (2000:160,n66) notes that, later, this indeed did explicitly take place—by way of ‘a ritual, according to Vedic scriptures, wherein the consent of the mother for her son to accept *sanyasi*-hood is given through preparation of a last meal from her hands’. Padmanaban (2000:152) also writes that ‘from then on they were to refer to their dear Sathya as ‘Swami’ (the revered one)’, such a change of name being prescribed for traditional renouncers. Moreover, Padmanaban (2000:173) reports that after this time, Sathya Sai Baba would:

occasionally complain of a ‘house-holder atmosphere’ in the places where He stayed and suddenly disappear.... They would find Him... on some rock overlooking the valley, or in some cavelike hollow or crevice, or on the sands of the river.

Padmanaban (2000:432) further notes a ‘story that a certain monk had visited Baba—and after he had left, Baba started donning a robe’; one of his devotees suggested that ‘Baba should look distinctive in a crowd. Therefore, she stitched an orange robe for Him. From then on, Baba started wearing orange and red robes’, orange, by far his predominantly favoured colour, being the colour most commonly worn by traditional renouncers.

But there the similarities with traditional modes of renunciation end. Padmanaban (2000:155) writes that Sathya Sai Baba’s mother pleaded with him not to go to live ‘in the Himalayas, not in caves and hills, far away from us. Give me your word that you will remain at Puttaparthi. Let your devotees come there. We will welcome them, gladly, and treat them kindly’. Sathya Sai Baba’s main ashram to

this day is in the town of his birth, and (while they were alive) he maintained close ties with his family, especially his mother²⁶. There is certainly a change of identity occurring here, but it is not that of the traditional renouncer—who leaves behind, via traditional funeral rites, all sense of individuality and personhood. Here, rather, we see Sathya Sai Baba emerging into a different, but still personal identity—adopting, as it were, the first incarnation of his divine persona.

The path from here to his fuller identity as “the avatar” is less (but still) convoluted. Swallow (1982:152) concludes—based largely upon similarities between an important event in Sathya Sai Baba’s life and certain traditional myths—that, through his identification with Shirdi Sai Baba, Sathya Sai Baba has ‘made the choice of Siva for his primary identification’. This, given the associations between Sathya Sai Baba and Kṛṣṇa that I have already noted, is somewhat problematic. Indeed, Swallow herself notes of Sathya Sai Baba that: ‘His own background is more strongly Vaishnavite than Saivite’ and that: ‘He also claims to be the other gods of the Hindu pantheon’. Swallow’s alignment of Sathya Sai Baba with Śiva is also problematic in that it is based upon a less than representative sample of his proclamations of his identity—she does not refer at all to his collected speeches, and she does not consider any of several episodes in Sathya Sai Baba’s life in which (as we have already seen) he portrays himself in terms of traditional Vaiṣṇava avatar mythology. Furthermore, we may note that the names given to his residences outside of Prashanthi Nilayam—Dharmaksethra²⁷ in Mumbai and Brindavan²⁸ near Whitefield—testify to the importance of his affinity with Kṛṣṇa, and Bassuk (1987b:91) notes in regard to Sathya Sai Baba’s “materializations”:

The type of object that Satya Sai Baba materializes is significant since many of them, such as the *Gita*, *amrita*, and statues of Vishnu and Krishna, are aspects of the Vaishnava tradition.

Whilst Sathya Sai Baba does also materialize Śaiva icons (e.g. the *liṅgams* described earlier), this other side of his persona ought to be given its due place²⁹.

There are also some specific problems with Swallow’s argument, although she goes to great lengths to prove it. Firstly (1982:134), she seeks to dilute White’s association of Sai Baba of Shirdi with Kabīr (cited earlier)—on the grounds that:

²⁶ See, especially, Kasturi, *Easwaramma: The Chosen Mother* (Prashanthi Nilayam, SSSBPT, 1989)

²⁷ Cf. *Bhagavad-Gītā* 1:1

²⁸ NB This name has mislead Bassuk (1987b:89) into writing that ‘his summer residence is in northern India at Vrindavana, where Krishna is thought to have resided.

²⁹ For more evidence of this, see p.44 above.

Kabir's doctrines, although syncretic, are steeped in Hindu thought.... The association of Sai Baba of Shirdi with Kabir rests at the level of general similarity rather than that Sai Baba specifically claimed any connection with the mediaeval saint.

As I noted in Section 2.1, however, Sai Baba of Shirdi is claimed to have explicitly associated himself with Kabīr on a number of occasions. Swallow (1982:135) next attempts to downplay Muslim influences on Gorakhnāth and his followers, but this proves to be similarly unconvincing—amounting to little more than her stating that they 'are Saivite yogis in outward appearance as well as in theology and practice'. There is some truth in this—as Daniel and Ann Grodzins Gold (1984:115) note, 'in recent times... Gorakh Nath has been identified with Shiva'—but Swallow does not attempt to rebut the evidence that we saw White presenting above.

Connecting, nonetheless, Sai Baba of Shirdi to these figures through the 'use of the *dhuni*', Swallow proceeds to claim that Sathya Sai Baba:

has dropped the Islamic associations and instead places greater stress on elements adopted from the Saivite tradition.... Sathya Sai Baba has made his connections with the god Siva in preparation for the later claim he made to be the god himself.

But this also proves to be problematic, for the implication that Sathya Sai Baba's identification of himself as a deity is some sort of calculated move on his part conflicts with what Swallow herself (1982:128) tells us about him—the first of two major episodes through which she maintains that Sathya Sai Baba propagated this identity occurred, she notes, after a three-month-long 'physical and spiritual crisis', in the course of which he 'collapsed and fell unconscious and remained so for several hours. ...He suffered in turn from bouts of manic elation or deep depression'. Swallow (1982:136) similarly describes a second episode—after which, she says, he proclaimed his identity as 'an incarnation of the god Siva himself':

Sathya Sai Baba was suddenly afflicted with a seizure which paralysed him for a week... at the end of that time he performed a miraculous cure on himself by pouring water with his less paralysed right hand onto his left arm and leg....

This is hardly the cool, calm, and conscious planning of a divine persona that Swallow's conclusion seems to imply.

Swallow goes on to quote an account from Sathya Sai Baba's official biography of a speech he made following the second of the above episodes:

'...I am Siva Sakti,' he declared, 'born into the gotra of Bharadvāj, according to a boon won by that sage from Siva and Sakti. Sakti herself was born in that gotra of the sage as Sai Baba of Shirdi; Siva and Sakti have incarnated as Myself in his gotra now; Siva will alone incarnate as the third Sai in the same gotra in Mysore state'.

But, in light of this, it is odd that Swallow (and, following her, Babb (1986),

pp.166-167) insists on describing Sathya Sai Baba as an avatar of Śiva—albeit in his androgynous aspect. Indeed, Bowen (1985:200f.) and Srinivas (2001:298), challenge this de-emphasis of the importance of Śakti—and we will see that they are right in doing so, for Sathya Sai Baba sometimes even explicitly identifies himself with the purely feminine aspect of divinity (see p.279 below). Unfortunately also, this passage contains a misquote on the part of Sathya Sai Baba’s biographer Kasturi—later printings report Sathya Sai Baba as identifying Sai Baba of Shirdi as ‘Siva’, and ‘the third Sai’ as ‘Sakthi’³⁰. Nevertheless, this, as we will see, has only minor ramifications for Swallow’s overall argument in this respect.

Indeed, Swallow goes on to show some quite credible similarities between Sathya Sai Baba’s explanation of his identity as Śiva and some of the traditional mythology associated with this figure. She continues her above quotation of Sathya Sai Baba’s speech as follows:

‘This illness had to be borne by Sakti for she incurred the ire of her Lord by neglecting to notice Bharadwāj for full eight days at Kailas their home. As a consequence of the neglect Bharadwāj suffered a stroke; Siva sprinkled restorative water and cured him. Today you saw the illness of Sakti cured by Siva by the same means...’.

And she goes on to claim that: ‘A number of Siva myths are clear structural equivalents of this story’—paraphrasing a passage from the *Śiva Purāṇa* as follows:

Siva and Parvati [a.k.a. Śakti] appoint the god Bhairava as a watchman while they indulge in different sports of their choice. In the middle of their play Parvati assumes the form of a mad woman and goes up to the door. Bhairava glances at her ‘as at a woman’ and she become furious and curses him to be born as a human on the earth. Siva then consoles Bhairava and when Bhairava takes mortal form, Siva does likewise [p.141].

The similarity of this passage with Sathya Sai Baba’s account is obvious, and becomes all the more remarkable when we note that a fuller version of this passage as reported in Sathya Sai Baba’s collected speeches (to which Swallow does not refer) provides, in addition, parallels to the *sport*, *glance*, and *consolation* motifs:

³⁰ NB The reference here is to *Sathyam-2* (5) 89. Swallow cites a 1973 edition, and Bowen (1985:140) quotes a 1975 edition to the same effect, but a later edition, containing a preface dated 1981, shows obvious evidence that an emendation has been made, with the word ‘Sakti’ inserted for the (shorter) word ‘Siva’ and so jutting well out into the centre margin. The speech of Sathya Sai Baba quoted in the passage is given in his collected speeches—the earliest version of it that I was able to consult was a 1988 printing, but this was in the original typeface, with no evidence of emendation, and has Sathya Sai Baba identifying Sai Baba of Shirdi with Śiva. Furthermore, as Bowen (1985:175) notes, some of the devotees of Sai Baba of Shirdi (independently) ‘regard Shirdi Baba as Shiva incarnate’. Kasturi often seems to quote Sathya Sai Baba from memory, so most likely simply misremembered this particular detail (cf. (note xxiii) <http://www.saiguru.net/english/articles/o2/shivashakti.htm> [19–2–2006])

Shiva and Shakthi were engaged in a competitive dance, trying to find out who could dance longer. Eight days passed thus, before Shakthi noticed Bharadhwaaja standing in the cold. She just cast a smile at him and danced along as before! The sage mistook the smile as a cynical refusal to notice him; so he turned his back on Kailaasa and started to descend. To his dismay, he found his left leg, hand and eye put out of action by a stroke. Shiva saw him fall; He came up to him and consoled him... Then, Shiva revived him and cured him, sprinkling water from the *Kamandalu*. Both Shiva and Shakthi granted the *Rishi* (sage) boons: ...Shiva said that They would take human form and be born in the Bharadhwaaja *Gothra* (lineage) thrice: Shiva alone as Shirdi Sai Baaba, Shiva and Shakthi together at Puttaparthi as Sathya Sai Baaba and Shakthi alone as Prema Sai, later. Then Shiva remembered the illness that had suddenly come upon Bharadhwaaja at Kailaasa on the eighth day of the waiting in the cold on the ice. He gave another assurance. “As expiation for the neglect which Shakthi showed you at Kailaasa for 8 days, this Shakthi will suffer the stroke for 8 days, when We both take birth as Sathya Sai and, on the 8th day, I shall relieve her from all signs of the disease by sprinkling water, just as I did at Kailaasa to cure your illness.” It was the working out of this assurance that you witnessed today, just now.³¹

The ‘different sports of their choice’ referred to in Swallow’s above paraphrase are evidently a reflection of what is here described as a ‘competitive dance’.

Significantly, Wendy Doniger (1980b:141,143) writes that:

In South India, Śiva and Kālī [a wild and destructive form of the goddess] are often said to compete in a dance contest.... The one form in which Pārvatī [a generally more reserved and gentle form of the goddess] may participate is as half of the androgyne... her function in this particular icon is to provide a peaceful contrast to his wild dance. For when the androgyne dances, the male half, on the right, performs the *tāṇḍava* and expresses the “horrific” emotion (*raudra*); the female half, on the left, performs the *lāsya* [“gentle” dance] and expresses the erotic emotion’.

What I will label as the *androgyne* and *stroke* motifs in Sathya Sai Baba’s account thus parallel features inherent to the *sport* (/dance) motif as it appears in this context. But this motif itself—if we are to go by a number of similar traditional myths—is a euphemism³². Swallow (1982:141) describes, for example, a passage from the *Padma-Purāṇa* in which:

The sage Bhṛgu goes to visit Siva, sent by the gods to decide which of the gods is greatest. At the door of Siva’s house a guard stops him entering, explaining that Siva is making love to Parvati, and that he risks his life if he disturbs them. Bhṛgu waits

³¹ Sathya Sai Baba (6-7-1963) S3 15:90,91 ‘Indhra’ (Indra) is the traditional regent of the gods. The ‘*Kamandalu*’ [*kamaṇḍalu*] is a ritual water vessel that Śiva is invariably traditionally depicted as carrying. ‘Kailaasa’ [Mt. Kailāsa] is the traditional abode of Śiva. NB A story notably similar to this and told well prior to Sathya Sai Baba’s birth, is attributed by devotee Pedda Bottu (2005:99) to an ascetic by the name of ‘Thapaswi Maharaj’, who ‘came to know of it from a maharshi’.

³² For more on this see Wendy Doniger (1980), pp.13off.

for many days, but finally curses Siva to take the form of the *lingam* in the *yonī*³³ as he is immersed in the embrace of a woman and dishonors the sage.

Of note here, in common with Sathya Sai Baba's story are what I will call the *waiting*, *dishonour* and *curse* motifs, and again that of the *androgynous*—this time with an explicit *incarnation* motif.

Swallow (1982:142) goes on to cite another myth, which she says 'establishes an even closer parallel with the Bharadvāj story':

All the gods and sages go to pay homage to Siva on Kailasa, when he is there with Parvati. All except the sage, Bhrngin, who has vowed to worship Siva alone, tactfully avoid the couple. Parvati is angered and curses Bhrngin to be a skeleton. Siva in turn, seeing that the sage cannot stand, gives him a third leg, and the sage dances with pleasure. But this again angers Parvati who 'performs tapas [penance] for Siva' and is granted her desire to become part of his own body. Then the wily sage, taking the form of a beetle, pierces a hole through the androgynous form of Siva and Parvati and manages to circumambulate Siva alone—a feat which even wins the approval of Parvati who 'shows him grace'.

Again, there are obvious similarities to Sathya Sai Baba's account—the *curse*, the *fall/stroke* and *restoration/grace* from it, the *dance*, and the *androgynous*—but Swallow goes further than this, claiming that:

The pattern of the three mortal births [in Sathya Sai Baba's account] follows exactly the sequence of events in the Bhrngin myth:

1. Parvati performs *tapas*/ /Sakti is born alone as Sai Baba the ascetic.
2. Parvati joins the body of Siva (takes androgynous form)/ /Siva-Sakti are born as the androgynous Sathya Sai Baba (an ambiguous ascetic erotic figure).
3. Bhrngin through persistence worships Siva alone/ /Siva is born alone as 3rd Sai.

To me, this seems tenuous in its own right—but, in any case, it is obviously undermined by the misquote that I pointed out earlier.

Still, the more general similarities do hold good, as perhaps does a further implication of Swallow (1982:140,n.34) that this is an echo of 'one of the best known sequences in the Siva mythology'—in which, as she writes:

the gods and sages, disturbed that Siva's *tapas* will destroy the universe, send Kama, the god of desire, to distract him. Siva with the heat of *tapas* burns Kama to ashes. They then send Parvati, the daughter of Himalaya to excite him, but she only succeeds after she has enhanced her own beauty by performing *tapas* herself. Later and more paradoxically, the gods, having brought the pair together in order to produce a child to destroy a monster threatening the earth, are worried that Siva's endless lovemaking will destroy the universe, realising that the god need never come to cli-

³³ NB The *yonī*, "womb", is a traditional icon of Śakti, as the *liṅga* ("phallus") is of Śiva. See Daniélou (1964:222ff.) for some traditional accounts of the significance of the symbolism involved here.

max, and impregnate Parvati. They send Agni, the god of fire, as a bird, to interrupt the couple and Siva's seed is spilled. But Parvati, angered that she cannot bear Siva's child, puts the curse of barrenness on the universe of the gods... To bring Siva from sexuality to asceticism the usual method is to interrupt the couple in their lovemaking. But although this interruption is 'cosmically necessary', the unfortunate agent commits a human sin and is cursed as a result.

Swallow (1982:145) plausibly concludes:

Sathya Sai Baba claims to be an incarnation come to save the world from evil. Bharadvāj, like Agni, can be seen as the envoy of the gods, who must disturb Siva's loveplay so that a savior is born.

And, crucially, she links the motif of *spilled seed* with that of *sprinkling* in Sathya Sai Baba's version via some of the ideas of the followers of Gorakhnāth, who:

Conceive of life as the natural downward flow of vital spirits, which are normally consumed by the female element in the lower body. Ascetic discipline reverses the direction of the natural flow. The vital spirits reach the forehead and are transformed into soma, the nectar of immortality³⁴, which then drips on to the body to revitalize it, the action being seen as Sakti drinking the nectar.

There is certainly some validity in these observations, but a final parallel story presented by Swallow (1982:144) complicates her overall argument in support of Sathya Sai Baba's identity as Śiva. She quotes *Śiva Purāṇa* 2, I, 6, 33-8 as follows:

Siva thought within himself like this—'Another being shall be created by me. Let him create everything, protect it and in the end let him dissolve it with my blessing. Having entrusted everything to him, we two remaining in Kasi, shall roam as we please keeping only the prerogative of conferring salvation. We can stay happily in this forest being free from worries (of creation). With the consent of Siva the supreme lord spread the liquorine essence of nectar on his left side, on the tenth limb, nectar which was the outcome of churning the ocean of his mind [i.e. *amṛta*—cf. p.189 below]... Thereupon a person came into being ... (Vishnu).

And here, the *sprinkling* motif produces not Śiva, or even Śiva-Śakti, but Viṣṇu! Moreover, I should point out that Sathya Sai Baba's own account (to which, as I noted above, Swallow does not refer) itself involves yet another major deity—Sathya Sai Baba prefaces what I cited of his story above by stating that:

Bharadhwaaja was a great sage, who studied the *Vedhas* for [a] full one hundred years; but, finding that the *Vedhas* were *anantha* (endless) he did *thapas* [penance] for prolonging life, and from Indhra he got two extensions of a century each. Even then, the *Vedhas* could not be completed, so, he asked Indhra again for another

³⁴ This is a traditional ambrosial intoxicant, analogous in many ways to *amṛta*. The curious may wish to consult R. Gordon Wasson 'The Soma of the Rig Veda: What Was It?' in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 91, No. 2. (Apr. - Jun., 1971), pp.169-187 [based upon his book—*Soma: divine mushroom of immortality* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968)].

hundred years. Indhra showed him 3 huge mountain ranges and said, “What you have learned in 3 centuries form only 3 handfulls [*sic*] from out of the 3 ranges, which the Vedhas are. So, give up the attempt to exhaust the *Vedhas*. Do a *Yaaga* (ritual sacrifice), instead, which I shall teach you: that will give you the fruit of *Vedhic* study, full and complete.” Bharadhwaaja decided on performing the *yaaga*; Indhra taught him how to do it; all preparations were completed. The sage wanted that Shakthi must preside and bless the *yaaga*. So he went to Kailaasa but, the time was not opportune for presenting his petition [(6-7-1963) S3 15:90].

Indra, the traditional king of the gods, is the major figure here—a figure who, as we will see in Chapter 3 below, is strongly traditionally associated with Viṣṇu.

This last tale has parallels in *Taittirīya-Brāhmaṇa* 3:10.11ff., a traditional work from the first millennium BCE, which gives the earliest detailed mythological account of Bharadvāja. In this story, as Thaneswar Sarmah (1991:13-15) translates:

Bharadvāja observed *brahmacarya* ‘a strict life ensuring celibacy [*sic*]’ while studying the lores [Vedas] continuously for three spans of life, each span consisting of a hundred years. As the third span of life came to a close and Bharadvāja lay exhausted by his age, Indra approached him and addressed [him thus], “Bharadvāja, if I would grant you a fourth span of life, what would you do thereby”? He replied, “I would have [*sic*] continued to observe celibacy in the same way for securing Vedic knowledge.” Thereupon, Indra drew his attention to the three hillocks... Then from each of the hillocks Indra took (away) a handful of dust and presenting the same before Bharadvāja again spoke to him, “O Bharadvāja, (suppose) these three hillocks are the three Vedas; they are endless! What you have so far studied is comparable only to these handfulls of dust and the rest has remained unknown to you. ...give up this endless (pursuit of) your Vedic study. ...Having said this, Indra told him of Agni which is called Sāvitra. Bharadvāja then acquired from Indra full knowledge of the Sāvitrāgni and became immortal; he attained the world of light and bliss, and ...merged with the sun-god.

‘Sāvitrāgni’ is presumably a type of fire sacrifice (dedicated to the Sun), and is associated here with ‘full knowledge’—thus recalling Bharadvāja’s sacrifice for the purposes of learning the Vedas in Sathya Sai Baba’s version.

Additionally, a modern retelling of this story by Kaipu Lakshminarasimha Shastri, clarifies, and adds to, some of the other potentially parallel motifs here:

Even gods were surprised by the austere penance of the young Bharadwaja. He feared neither rain nor storm. He gave up food and drink. As time passed, his body began to wear out. Everybody began to fear his condition. But he did not stop his penance. Finally, one day, as he could not even sit, he collapsed.

Lord Indra then appeared.

“Arise, Bharadwaja. Here I am!”

“God of Gods, at last you have appeared!”

Bharadwaja rose slowly and folded his hands.

Indra blessed him and said: ...“Look here.”

Bharadwaja saw before him three mountain-sized masses of radiance. From each of the three heaps Indra picked up a handful and placed them in Bharadwaja’s hands. Immediately the three radiant objects melted in Bharadwaja’s body and he felt a new vigor.³⁵

To bless Bharadwaja, a number of groups of gods arrived - Surya, Chandra, Agni, Varuna, Pushan, and Saraswati. To all the gods Bharadwaja made obeisance. Said they to Bharadwaja:

“Bharadwaja, give as gift to the people of the world the wisdom of the Vedas. Establish morality. Teach people how to live a righteous life. Peace in the world has been disturbed by the menace of the wicked demons. Try to overcome them. In your efforts for this, we will help you.”³⁶

Here, then, are the *fall* (/stroke) and *restoration/grace* motifs—this last too through handfuls of a certain substance (i.e. the *sprinkling* motif), and also the idea of a subsequent divinely sanctioned mission—this, furthermore, being reminiscent of that of the traditional avatars in general (see p.68ff. above).

The motifs of a long life and of propitiating the gods for knowledge also occur in other traditions associated with Bharadvāja. Sarmah (1991:17) notes a tradition which has Bharadvāja approach Śiva’s son Skanda ‘with a request that he is to be imparted esoteric knowledge of Śaivism’ and another in which he receives ‘brahmavidyā’ [knowledge of *brahman*] from Indra before in turn teaching it ‘to his disciples who desired ‘long’ life. Similarly, Sarmah (1991:275) describes a story from the *Caraka-Saṁhitā* in which Bharadvāja is sent as an envoy of the ṛṣis to Indra to learn *Āyurveda* (‘life-knowledge’—traditional “medicine”), successfully mastering which, he ‘acquired a very long life’. Yet other traditions strongly associate Bharadvāja with the *sprinkling* and *resurrection* motifs of Sathya Sai Baba’s tale. In one of these, as Sarmah (1991:81-82) describes it, while Bharadvāja’s wife was preparing sacrificial offerings for Indra and Agni ‘a dark being came out of the smoke from the hearth and began to consume the cakes she had prepared’. When confronted by Bharadvāja, the ‘black’ being says:

I was cursed by Brahmā at a meeting of gods and Dānavas. [But] Being propitiated by me Brahmā said to me, “When a great sage will, in course of time sprinkle you with ambrosia, then only you will be redeemed from my curse, not otherwise.

Not having any *amṛta*—nor wanting to reduplicate the arduous task of churning the ocean necessary for its acquisition (cf. p.179 below)—Bharadvāja, on instruc-

³⁵ <http://www.freeindia.org/biographies/sages/bharadwaja/page4.htm> [15-6-2006]

³⁶ <http://www.freeindia.org/biographies/sages/bharadwaja/page5.htm> [15-6-2006]

tions from the ‘being’, *sprinkles* him with water from the Ganges river, transforming him into his natural white colour, and thus procuring a blessing for the spot from which the water was drawn. Similarly, in another traditional tale, as Sarmah (1991:84-5) describes it, Bharadvāja’s sister is transformed from being ‘very ugly’ into a state of ‘incomparable beauty’, being *sprinkled* with water through the grace of Śiva, who her husband had propitiated for this end—the spot upon which the water fell becoming a particularly sacred place. Evidently the (conjoined) *sprinkling* and *restoration* motifs have strong traditional associations with Bharadvāja³⁷. Finally, as Sarmah (1991:19ff.,86ff.) also shows, Bharadvāja is instrumental in some traditional accounts of the Rāma and Vāmana avatars—and in this respect too is well fitted to take his place in Sathya Sai Baba’s personal avatar myth.

Again, there is no exact agreement with Sathya Sai Baba’s story in any of these, but they are at least as relevant as the stories cited by Swallow above. The general parallels here and in all of what we have seen above go some way towards elucidating the mythological context of this particular claim of Sathya Sai Baba³⁸. There are strong Śaiva themes here, but also a few potential connections to Vaiṣṇava traditions (which, as we will see, more strongly promote avatar(-like) ideas), and I will further explore such suggestions of sectarianism in the next section. Suffice it to conclude for now that Sathya Sai Baba’s presentation of his background as an avatar ties in closely with traditional paradigms. Over the course of this study, we will see this to be generally true of his divine persona as a whole, and we will see more of this too in the next section, in which I will review a number of sociological studies. These, while predominantly focussing upon Sathya Sai Baba’s following, inevitably reflect in some ways upon his persona.

³⁷ NB Of course, as Dandekar (1979:82,n42) notes, in Hindu traditions, more generally speaking, the scripturally prescribed rites of taking a ‘bath (*snāna*), sipping of water (*ācamana*), and, particularly sprinkling with water (*prokṣana*), [are] intended for physical and spiritual purification’.

³⁸ NB In the course of my research I came across many other similar traditional tales, but these provide more remote or tangential parallels than those that I have outlined here. See: Smith (1985), pp.155,258-9; Thomas Donaldson (1986), pp.64,n.44; Tagare (1997), pp.130-132; Sarmah (1991), pp.72-7; entry on Bharadvāja in *The Dictionary of Hinduism* (M. Stutley & J. Stutley, Harper & Row, San Francisco,1977); and <http://www.bvml.org/SBTP/SNM/rudraz2.html> [13-6-2006].

2.3 Sathya Sai, Sects & Sociology

WHAT has sociology or the social sciences to do with the sciences of the spirit or the inquiry into the human spirit? This is a question that is commonly raised. So too, many do ask: What has the spiritual student and *saadhaka* (spiritual aspirant) to do with society and its problems? It must be said, that both these attitudes are wrong.¹

In this section I will focus upon a number of scholarly articles that explore sociological aspects of, or present sociological explanations for, Sathya Sai Baba's divine persona. The issue of Sathya Sai Baba's sectarian alignment, which I have already touched upon, looms large in these. In 1982, Raymond Lee published the first of a series of sociological studies of the Sathya Sai Baba movement in Malaysia. Lee (1982:131) has little to say about Sathya Sai Baba in himself, but he does note the presence of allegations of sexual abuse dating back to 1977—and that this has been a big issue for the movement in Malaysia. He further writes that in a campaign to discredit Sathya Sai Baba, ensuing from such allegations, some former devotees have attempted a 're-examination of the Hindu scriptures to highlight the assumed contradictions in Sai Baba's claim that he is a joint incarnation of Shiva and Shakti'—specifically: 'Because there is little avatar doctrine in Shaivism, some members have capitalised on this to point out to Shaivite devotees that Sai Baba's claim is invalid'. Evidently, the (supposedly) Śaiva background of Sathya Sai Baba's identification of himself as an avatar is more than merely a matter of academic debate; there is confirmation for us here that the details of Sathya Sai Baba's avatar claim have a bearing on the ongoing controversies surrounding him.

Sociologist Donald Taylor (1986:85), writing on the Sathya Sai Baba movement in the UK, states that: 'The movement seems to have appealed to South Indian and Sri Lankan Saivites rather than Vaishnavites'—in accordance, he says, with 'the fact that he had claimed to be the incarnation of Shiva-Shakti who would not be recognized as the supreme deity by Vaishnavites'. This, however, is problematic—for, as we have seen, and will further see, Sathya Sai Baba very much also, indeed even predominantly, presents himself as the supreme deity in Vaiṣṇava terms. Indeed, Taylor (1986:92,n2,86) himself qualifies his claim by noting that:

The reasons why Sathya Sai Baba became popular among South Indians are complex... there is probably an element of ethnic pride involved. Sathya Sai Baba is a Telugu speaker and is regarded as a South Indian rather than a North Indian, so his appeal would be to South Indians generally.

Furthermore, he goes on to write of Sathya Sai Baba's following that 'it was not

¹ Sathya Sai Baba (1-3-1974) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume12/sss12-29.pdf> [1-5-2007]

confined to these alone, and gradually devotees were to be found from a broad spectrum of Indian immigrants’.

Taylor (1987a:122,131) elsewhere cites Sathya Sai Baba’s ‘announcement that he was the universal god, so that devotions made to any form of godhead in the universe eventually came to him’ (see p.148 below), suggesting that ‘Sai Baba advanced this claim in 1968, at a time when the movement was expanding into foreign countries, such as the United States, Australia, and Britain’. But Sathya Sai Baba’s statement, I would note, is a close paraphrase of a claim attributed to Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (see p.148 below). And, since, as we will see, Sathya Sai Baba made several statements portraying his identity in Vaiṣṇava terms (and especially aligning himself with Kṛṣṇa) well before the time of the expansion of his movement, his more dramatic statement here can hardly be seen as presenting much of a disjunction with the earlier stages of his career. Indeed, Taylor (1987a:123) himself acknowledges something akin to this—albeit that he does not pick up on the parallel to the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. He writes that Sathya Sai Baba’s:

claims... were made within the framework of Hindu belief. Even the assertion to be the incarnation of the universal god forms part of [Neo-]Hindu claims about itself [*sic*] (that it is the oldest religion, hence the source of authority for all other religions in the world). And these claims were accepted by his followers on traditional grounds legitimated by the sanctity of eternity.

Another example of this comes via a passage that Taylor (1987a:122) cites (without comment) in which Sathya Sai Baba defines sixteen ‘marks’ of the avatar:

control over the five elements (earth, air, fire, water, and space); control over the five motor organs of the body; and control over the five sensory organs of the body... the triple powers of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence.

Srinivas (2001:298) connects this with Sathya Sai Baba’s alignment of himself with Kṛṣṇa as a ‘*purnavatar*’ (a “full-avatar”)², concluding that: ‘for this reason ...it is difficult to unambiguously state that Baba’s dominant identity is with Siva, as has been done by other scholars’.

As we will also see (p.331), Sathya Sai Baba claims to have preached universalist ideals from the earliest stages of his mission—even before he made his claim to be Sai Baba. And this further undermines the validity of Taylor’s suggestion that Sathya Sai Baba substantially modified his views to cater to the expansion of his movement into other countries. The same holds true of some ideas presented by Srinivas (1999b:95-96) that closely parallel Taylor’s reasoning:

² See p.121 (cf. p.228) below.

At the First World Conference of Sathya Sai Seva Organizations at Bombay in 1968, after inaugurating the center of the World Council of Sai Organizations in Bombay called Dharmakshetra, ‘the field of righteousness’³, Baba announced that he was the avatar or incarnation of Sai and he had come to establish dharma. In June the same year he left for a tour of East Africa, his first and only foreign visit.... The growth of the organizational bases of the movement and that of Puttaparthi into a miniature city with international links parallels three phases in the representation of Sathya Sai Baba’s persona and the reconstruction of the memory of Shirdi Sai Baba. The first phase stretches from 1940 to about 1958 when he declared on various occasions that he was Sai Baba of Shirdi reborn. Then there is an intermediate phase till 1968, when there is a suggestion of his avatar-hood, but chiefly as an avatar of Siva and Sakti. At the first world conference in 1968 came the explicit declaration that he was an avatar who had come to restore righteousness for all humanity.

Whilst Srinivas sees no evidence in the earliest stage of Sathya Sai Baba’s religious career that he considered himself to be an avatar, I would point out that the concept, if not the term ‘avatar’ is very much present even in his initial identity claim (cited at the head of the previous section). His statement: ‘Your Venkavadhoota prayed that I be born in your family; so, I came’, surely portrays him as a deity incarnating in response to the prayers of the righteous—a motif common in traditional avatar accounts.

Moreover, despite Srinivas’ assertion to the contrary, explicit references to Sathya Sai Baba being an avatar do occur very early in his teachings. Sometime around 1945-1946, he is said to have pronounced: ‘I am that Krishna [that sang the *Gita*]. When I am here right before you, why should you read the *Gita*?’ And in the late 1940’s, we are told:

Swami never took sweets, ghee, milk, or curds. When pressed by devotees for the reason, Swami replied that He had had enough of them in *Kṛṣṇāvatāra* [SSSA15].

Identifying himself with Kṛṣṇa as the composer of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, and invoking popular fables of the child Kṛṣṇa’s love of sweets and dairy products, Sathya Sai Baba evidently understood himself to be a major avatar.

And there are further references also—a devotee relates the following story from October of 1947:

In the place where the *mandira* [Sathya Sai Baba’s “temple”] stood, there was a forest full of *tulasī*. Swami revealed that Lord *Nārāyaṇa* as a *ṛṣi* had meditated there. Referring to Himself, He said that the same *ṛṣi* had reincarnated now [SSSA 47].

Here, the reference is to a *ṛṣi* (seer) by the name of *Nārāyaṇa*, who was feared by the gods for the fierce austerities that he undertook and who came to be tradition-

³ I.e. after *Bhagavad-Gītā* 1:1.

ally regarded as an avatar of Viṣṇu⁴. Moreover, even in this period, we find proclamations anticipating Sathya Sai Baba's aspirations to the status of a universal deity—as Bowen (1985:480) notes, it was as early as November of 1949 that Sathya Sai Baba first claimed: 'All names (of God) are mine' (albeit that this claim was 'made privately or in a select gathering')⁵. Yet further evidence comes in October 1953, when Sathya Sai Baba gave his first public discourse. He refers to himself as '*Niraakaara* (formless)'⁶ which has become '*Sakaara* [sic]⁷ (one with form)'—i.e. as *the* avatar—and describes some of the 'various ways' in which he will carry out his 'mission' (the idea that the avatar comes with a mission being, as we have seen, one of the few universals of the avatar traditions. Furthermore, the means that he gives for carrying out his mission: '*leela*', '*mahima*', and '*upadhesha*' ('prank', 'miracle', and 'instruction')⁸, are also traditionally associated with the major traditional avatar figures—especially Kṛṣṇa. Indeed, at the conclusion of the discourse in question here, he clearly associates himself with Kṛṣṇa:

Do not be led away by doubt and vain argument; do not question how and whether I can do all this. The cowherds of Brindhaavan also doubted whether the little boy who grew in their midst could lift Govardhanagiri and hold it aloft! The thing needed is Faith, and yet more Faith [(10-1953) S1 1:4].

His reference is to the traditional story of the child Krishna lifting aloft a mountain to use as an umbrella to protect his devotees from the wrath of the storm god⁹. There is, then, far more in this first "phase" of Sathya Sai Baba's persona than the claims to be 'the Sai Baba of Shirdi reborn' that Srinivas notes.

Similar, if perhaps lesser, problems pertain to the second of Srinivas' above-described phases. Whilst there certainly are some "suggestions of avatarhood", and whilst, as we saw in the previous section, the most spectacular of these did chiefly identify him as an avatar of Śiva and Śakti, in 1961 Sathya Sai Baba made the following testament to his avatarhood in Vaiṣṇava terms: 'Raama and Krishna and Sai Baaba appear different because of the dress each has donned, but it is the Self-same Entity, believe Me'¹⁰. And in 1964, he repeated much the same state-

⁴ See Daniélou (1964), p.182 (especially n1,n2). NB Kasturi lists in this time-period several "miraculous" identifications of himself with the avatars of Viṣṇu (Sathyam-1 (6) 5off.).

⁵ NB Bowen cites Sathyam-1 108,145

⁶ NB This Sanskrit term connotes Viṣṇu, Śiva, and, more generally, 'the universal spirit, god' [MW].

⁷ I.e. *sākāra* = *sa* (with) + *ākāra* (form).

⁸ Sathya Sai Baba (10-1953) S1 1:2

⁹ See, e.g. *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 10:25ff.

¹⁰ Sathya Sai Baba (21-10-1961) S2 18:92

ment, even explicitly identifying himself with ‘Vishnu’¹¹. Further to this, in 1961 and 1962, Sathya Sai Baba again specifically associated himself with Kṛṣṇa: prefacing the above quotation by alluding to *Bhagavad-Gītā* 13:13 in saying: ‘My feet are within your reach at all times, *sarvatha paani paada*’; alluding to *Bhagavad-Gītā* 9:24 in portraying himself as the recipient of Vedic sacrifices¹²; and paralleling *Bhagavad-Gītā* 9:17 in portraying himself as the embodiment of all the Vedas¹³.

Moreover, in this period too, we find proclamations that accord more with the next of Srinivas’ phases—in which Sathya Sai Baba is supposed to have taken on the role of a global deity. Thus, he claimed in 1961 that: ‘There is no one in this world who does not belong to Me; All are Mine. They may not call out My Name or any Name, but, still they are Mine’¹⁴; and in 1966 that: ‘Worship of the Lord in any form, in any name, is worship of Sai’¹⁵ (again echoing the *Bhagavad-Gītā*—see p.148 below). More to this effect, in another passage from the early 1960s, he proclaimed: ‘I have taken avatar not to do small things, but for doing great things; to uplift the world’¹⁶, and, in a speech on the 26th of June 1960, he said:

When the Andhra State was formed some one told Me that I had been taken out of the Madras State and made an Andhra! I told him that the whole world was My Mansion and that Madras and Andhra were rooms in that Mansion! [SSS1 159]

But even these last proclamations are in keeping with the spirit of traditional Vaiṣṇava descriptions of the avatars: Rāma is held to have ruled over the seven (traditional) continents; *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 9:11.25, for example, describes Rāma as ‘*tribhuvaneśvaraḥ*’ (Lord of the three worlds, i.e. the whole universe); and *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 10:69.17 hails Kṛṣṇa as ‘*akhila-loka-nāthe*’ (lord of the whole world)¹⁷. No doubt Śiva and Śakti are similarly described in various traditions, but

¹¹ Sathya Sai Baba (19-8-1964) S4 28:160

¹² Sathya Sai Baba (1-7-1962) S2 46:262 [see also p.149 below].

¹³ Sathya Sai Baba (4-10-1962) S2 43:248 NB He recently gave a more elaborate version of this—using folk etymology to argue that ‘Sathya stands for *Rig Veda*. ‘Sa’, ‘Aa’ and ‘Ya’ in *Sayi* stand for *Sama Veda*, *Atharvana Veda*, and *Yajur Veda*, respectively. Therefore, Sathya Sai is the very personification of the four *Vedas*’ (Sathya Sai Baba (12-3-2002) <http://www.sathyasai.org/discour/2002/do20312.html> [29-3-2007]. The idea of the identity of the avatar with the Vedas finds some parallel in *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 8.16.31, in which Kṛṣṇa is described as *trayī-vidyātman* (“he whose self is the three Vedas”); and 7:11.7, in which he is termed *sarva-veda-maya* (“comprised of all the Vedas”). Sathya Sai Baba also presents himself as the: ‘Person from whom the *Vedhas* ...emanated’—i.e. the *Puruṣa* (see Chapter 4), or perhaps *Brahmā* (see, e.g., *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 3:12.34).

¹⁴ S2 1-2 (14-2-1961)

¹⁵ Sathya Sai Baba (23-11-1966) S6 42:209

¹⁶ SSSA 66

¹⁷ NB Unless otherwise attributed, all English translations of Sanskrit passages are my own, derived from critical or commonly available editions and/or e-texts (see Bibliography for details).

it cannot be concluded that this ‘chiefly’ aligns him with them.

And the third of Srinivas’ phases, beginning in 1968, is itself problematic, for Sathya Sai Baba’s supposed announcement of his identity with ‘all forms of all gods’ is again highly reminiscent of traditional Vaiṣṇava terms—thus being in keeping with what we have seen of his identity statements in the previous two phases. He says:

This is a human form in which every Divine entity, every Divine Principle, that is to say all the Names and Forms ascribed by man to God, are manifest... *Sarvadhaivathwa sarwaroopalanu dharin-china maanavaakaaram*. ...you have a chance to experience the bliss of the vision of the *sarvadhaivathwa swaruupam* (the form, which is all forms of all Gods) now, in this life itself [(17-05-1968) S8 19:99].

And the term ‘*sarvadhaivathwa swaruupam*’, recalls, for example, *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 9:18.48—which describes Kṛṣṇa as ‘*sarvadevamayaṁ devaṁ*’ (the god who consists of all gods)¹⁸, and *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 10:74:19—which describes him as ‘*devatāḥ sarvā*’ (all deities). Moreover, David Shulman suggested to me that forms even closer to Sathya Sai Baba’s usage might be found in the Telugu version of this work (to which, due to my linguistic limitations, I have not had access). There is also perhaps a connection here with traditional representations of divine kingship (on which see Section 3.1 below)—for example, David Smith (1985:75) writes of one early king who was praised as ‘an avatāra of all the gods united in one... *sarvadevatāvatāram ivaikartra darśayantam*’. As we will see, the paradigms of king and avatar developed side-by-side, and sometimes intertwined, and it is possible that, as a legacy of what we saw earlier to be the traditionally elevated position of the likes of his caste within the royal courts, Sathya Sai Baba is as much an heir to the symbolic idiosyncrasies of the former of these as to the latter (see Section 3.5).

But he certainly does, very much, draw upon the latter. To give another example from the period in question here, Bowen (1985:482) cites his official biography as claiming that in late-1968 ‘Baba ‘makes it clear’ that he is Krishna incarnate’, and again, as we saw Sathya Sai Baba do in the previous “phase” of his persona, he invokes verses from the *Bhagavad-Gītā* to this effect¹⁹. In other cases, he describes ‘Vishnu’ as periodically incarnating for the task of transforming the whole world into a ‘*Prashanthi Nilayam*’²⁰, or he indirectly associates himself with Kṛṣṇa in referring to ‘My old *Bhakthas* [devotees], Kamsa, the Gopees, Akrura, Devaki,

¹⁸ See also *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 10:86.54.

¹⁹ Bowen cites Sathyam-3 70 (= p.64 in some editions).

²⁰ Sathya Sai Baba (14-1-1970) S10 1:8

Vasudeva and Nandha’²¹, and even explicitly declares: ‘How fortunate you are that you have today the same Krishna, the full *Prema-Avathaar*, moving among you!’²²

One passage in particular makes his Vaiṣṇava leanings only too clear—he identifies himself with the qualities of several traditional Vaiṣṇava avatars, and declares that he has come as their successor, possessed of all their combined attributes:

The attributes and qualities which were assumed when, to save Prahlada, the Supreme Person came; The attributes and qualities which were assumed when, to save the elephant, the Lotus-eyed came; The attributes and qualities which were assumed when, to save the poor Kuchela the Lord of Veda came; The attributes and qualities which were assumed when, to save the boy, Dhruva, He came from Heaven; Now, with all the attributes, all the qualities has come, He whom the gods adore, the Refuge of the Rejected. The Lord of all the worlds, the Lord of Infinite Glory, As all Existence, as all Knowledge and All Bliss in one Form embodied As Puttaparthi Sathya Sai, the Over-lord of all that Is.²³

And Sathya Sai Baba’s devotees sometimes do take his Vaiṣṇava identity as primary—Leo Howe (1999:118), presumably reiterating views presented to him by Sathya Sai Baba devotees in Bali, writes that Sathya Sai Baba:

proclaimed himself the reincarnation of the nineteenth-century saint Shirdi Sai Baba... whom Sathya Sai Baba claims was the first reincarnation of Krishna. The link to Krishna is therefore direct, and this is the reason why the Bhagavad Gita is the movement’s most important holy book.

The explicit connection here with Kṛṣṇa is in fact absent from Sathya Sai Baba’s own views on Sai Baba of Shirdi, but it is true that in referring to the events of the Śiva-Śakti story quoted above (which he situated in a previous world “age”²⁴) he sometimes does identify himself with Kṛṣṇa: ‘To fulfil the promise made in *Thretha Age*, *Achyutha* has incarnated on this earth, *Vaasudheva*, *Shrihari*, has come into the world’²⁵. And there is nothing completely anomalous about such an identification—*Bhagavad-Gītā* 10:21,23 has Kṛṣṇa identify himself with both Viṣṇu and Śiva, and, as we will see (especially in Chapter 4), other traditions that may have impinged upon Sathya Sai Baba’s views similarly invoke both of these deities.

More to this effect, Bowen (1985:144-145) notes in the ‘hymnody’ of the Bradford Sathya Sai Baba Centre a preponderance of epithets associated with Śiva, but

²¹ Sathya Sai Baba (17-10-1969) S9 25:136ff. NB These are famous purāṇic characters.

²² Sathya Sai Baba (1-6-1977) S13 38:253 NB On *prema* (love), see p.265 below.

²³ (23-11-1985) <http://sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume18/sss18-25.pdf> [14-6-2007]. NB Again, the Telugu *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* might be a good place to look for a prototype for his proclamation here.

²⁴ Sathya Sai Baba (6-7-1963) S3 15:91 NB On the traditional “ages” of the world see p.204 below.

²⁵ (23-11-1979) S14 43:272 NB These epithets are traditionally exclusively applied to Kṛṣṇa [MW].

also points out ‘the prominence of one of the names of Vishnu [i.e. “Nārāyaṇa”] in the *arati* [“closing”, benedictory] prayer’. In his conclusion (1985:476), he calls for ‘a full analysis of the theology of the *bhajans* sung by Baba’s devotees’, and, whilst I will not attempt such an analysis here²⁶, it is interesting to note that, in the current edition of the official compendium of these songs, the greatest proportion of *bhajans* are devoted to the avatars of Viṣṇu—Rāma and Kṛṣṇa. It is also perhaps significant that two of the three most popular *bhajans* composed by Sathya Sai Baba himself are similarly inclined²⁷. Similarly, whilst Bowen (1985:153ff.,160) describes an abundance of icons associating Sathya Sai Baba with Śiva, he himself notes another which depicts Sathya Sai Baba as Viṣṇu, and he goes on to note that:

the place of birth of Sathya Sai Baba is associated by his devotees with the epic and puranic stories of Rama and of Krishna... he is believed to be the epic prince returned to earth.... Baba is reputed to have exalted the feats that he can be expected to perform over the accomplishments of Krishna himself.²⁸

Here, then, is yet further confirmation of the important place that Vaiṣṇava traditions and symbolism occupy in Sathya Sai Baba’s persona.

In contrast to this, Arvind Sharma (1986:230) reinforces the view that we saw promoted by Swallow earlier of Śiva as being Sathya Sai Baba’s dominant identity, summarizing what Swallow’s article has to say to this effect, and adding that:

It has often been maintained that Śiva was an ‘alien’ god who was assimilated into the Hindu pantheon... If such was indeed the case, then which god would be better qualified than Śiva to preside over the integration of the influences of an ‘alien’ West with Hinduism? Moreover, the fact that Śiva is a god more concerned with cosmic change, unlike Viṣṇu, who is more concerned with cosmic stability, makes him ideally suited for mediating transition in a society undergoing widespread and rapid social change.

A problem with this, however, is that it is, for the most part, only Indologists who have seen Śiva’s integration into Hinduism in a positive (or neutral) light. When this idea has been taken up at a popular level—as it has long been by Tamil nationalists²⁹—it has been put to the purpose of cultural separatism, rather than in-

²⁶ NB As one familiar with a great number of these devotional songs, I would suggest that such an analysis would be a comparatively fruitless undertaking—many of them have been adopted into the Sathya Sai Baba hymnody on the whim of devotees from a wide variety of religious backgrounds, others, composed by such devotees, are no less diverse. The overwhelming majority of these songs merely identify, with little elaboration, Sathya Sai Baba with one or more traditional divinities.

²⁷ Viz.: “Prema mudita manase kaho Rama Rama Ram”, and “Hari bhajana bina sukha shanti nahi”, the third being “Manase bhajore”—devoted, rather, to Shiva and Sai Baba of Shirdi [see SBM].

²⁸ I.e. lifting a mountain aloft and stimulating the growth of his home town (see pp.118,219).

²⁹ See, e.g., Sumathi Ramaswamy (1997) [especially the third chapter of the online edition].

tegration. It is true that Viṣṇu is traditionally ‘the preserver’ of the cosmos, but his avatars, as we will see, are believed to come to usher in quantum leaps from one cosmological “age” of the world to another—a fact which surely makes him a more suitable candidate for accommodating rapid social change. Furthermore, I would point out that the traditional stories of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa (avatars of Viṣṇu) have also been interpreted by some Indologists as parables for the supposed conquest and integration of indigenous peoples into Hinduism—thus, following Sharma’s logic, they should be as well placed as Śiva to integrate “alien” influences. Not that this is likely to translate into practice—Noel Sheth (2002:108) cites some examples in which these ideas too have been taken up on a popular level, and, again, they seem to favour divisive, rather than integrative interests.

All of the above must surely lay to rest what we saw earlier to be the claim of Swallow (and Babb after her) that Sathya Sai Baba’s primary identification is with Śiva. But Srinivas (2001:299) suggests that it is not so important ‘what kind of tradition (Saivite, Vaishnavite or any other) he represents’, and—whilst we saw Lee (1982) note earlier that this issue is, or at least was, important to some of his devotees—in the broader perspective in which Srinivas is operating, this is a fair comment. And, despite what we have seen above, the general sense of Srinivas’ schema perhaps does contribute something to an understanding of Sathya Sai Baba’s devotees’ perceptions of him—these have no doubt become increasingly universalized. Most devotees today would certainly not attribute a sectarian identity to him. Indeed, in contrast to what we saw Lee (1982) note of controversies amongst some of Sathya Sai Baba’s overseas Hindu followers regarding his alignment of himself with Śiva, Jody Marshall (1998:60,66)—interviewing an ethnic Indian Canadian devotee—reiterates the claim of Sathya Sai Baba that I quoted above: *‘This human form of Sai is one in which every divine entity, every divine principle, that is to say all the Names and Forms ascribed by man to god, are manifest’*, and it is evident that her informant believed this, for—in describing some of the traditional characteristics of the various images of Hindu deities which adorn her home—she (the informant) emphasizes ‘their embodiment in Satya Sai Baba’, going on to cast the figure of Jesus in this light also.

This does not, however, as I hope to have shown, translate into such a great change in Sathya Sai Baba’s presentation of himself. Srinivas’ “phases”, if applied to what we can glean of Sathya Sai Baba’s self-understanding, overlap considerably. The only exception is perhaps the period of his initial identification with

Shirdi Sai Baba, but this seems to have lasted less than a decade—only half of the time that Srinivas allots to it. And Sathya Sai Baba's identity as Shirdi Sai Baba certainly carries through into the later phases of his persona also—so, in this sense, even this first phase is not a discrete entity. Whatever may be behind Sathya Sai Baba's various personae, it is not simply a calculated attempt to adapt to the expanding geographical spread (and/or economic circumstances) of his following³⁰. Babb (1987:174) summarises well the interpenetrating nature of Sathya Sai Baba's various identities:

As in a geological deposit... nothing is lost, for residues of older identities continue to exist below the newer and higher strata. Thus, the playful, Krishna-like child lives on.... And the identity of Shirdi Sai Baba is retained.... But all these images are understood to be modulations of the most inclusive identity—that of the sacred atemporal all... a divine being beyond the limits of time, space, and gender....

And his last point here hints at one possible answer to the question of what may be behind Sathya Sai Baba's divine personae—often, as we have seen, and will further see, Sathya Sai Baba connects his identity statements to the 'sacred atemporal all' of traditional *advaita* ideology.

We have in this section (and earlier, in Section 1.4) that there are a significant number of sociological studies of Sathya Sai Baba and his following, and I would note that this reflects a general scholarly trend towards a focus on the audience-related dynamics of religious traditions. Whilst my own study goes against this trend—in focussing upon Sathya Sai Baba himself—I have, as I hope to have shown in my first chapter, carefully thought out my approach, and I will conclude this chapter with a few more observations in this regard. Thus, I would point out that the audiences delineated in most of the studies of Sathya Sai Baba that we have encountered are physically remote from him. No doubt, their occasional visits to his ashram have influenced him in subtle ways, but it is my impression that Sathya Sai Baba is very much a strong-willed and self-directed, self-determining individual, unlikely to be much swayed by such contacts—he says:

My exultation is Mine, My prompting is Mine. I will never abide by another's likes or dislikes. I do not pay heed to such. ...All are in my Control; then, who can tell Me what to do? [(21-10-1961) S2 22:114]

³⁰ NB A second article by Srinivas (2001), promisingly titled 'The Advent of the Avatar', very much parallels her 1999 article (to which I have referred here), but Srinivas recently informed me (in a personal communication, 10-4-2007) that she has since abandoned her notion of discrete phases in Sathya Sai Baba's persona. She does not, she says, invoke these in her forthcoming book (Srinivas, 2008), which focuses on 'the varied cartographies, somatic dispositions, and cultural memories implicated in urbanization and transnationalism'.

And, whilst he claims: ‘I do not make speeches. I only ‘converse’ with you’³¹—contrasting the pragmatically focussed nature of his discourses with what he characterizes as the merely aesthetically pleasing speeches of other orators—one of the things that Haraldsson (1997) notes of him, is that, even in private conversation, he is apt to deliver ‘monologues’. This is very much my impression also. Mata Betty specifically instructed us not to ask Sathya Sai Baba any questions for which we could get answers from his discourses, and yet—as even the small sample of his answers to my specific questions that we saw in the first chapter shows—his tendency is to answer most personal questions with general religious material that he might just as easily deliver in a public discourse to thousands of people from all manner of cultural backgrounds.

Clearly, when he speaks, it is not audience dynamics that are foremost in his mind. Or perhaps, rather, I would suggest, there is a sense in which his primary audience is internal. We have seen that his background is certainly conducive to his having internalized a large number of “Hindu” religious traditions, and, with the various “innovations” that he makes in respect to these (see Section 1.4), it is almost as if *they* constitute his audience. For this reason, then, in addition to the reasons that I gave in Section 1.4, considering his views against a background of these traditions, rather than focussing upon the views of his followers (who often, as we saw Babb note, are unaware of these traditions), is thus appropriate.

I will thus begin my “history of the avatar ideas as they relate to Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings”—albeit that, as has been the case in this chapter, I will proceed only roughly chronologically, dividing my treatment thematically as I progress. Alf Hiltebeitel (1983:207) cites Madeleine Biardeau as presenting a significant challenge to academic models that ‘treat the history of Hinduism in relatively discrete stages: the sacrificial religion of the Brāhmaṇas; the Upaniṣadic way of knowledge; *bhakti* in the late Upaniṣads, epics, Purāṇas, and sectarian traditions; *tantra* (impacting upon the latter two); and either sidelight or limelight treatment of the development of the philosophical systems’. But, “relatively discrete” or otherwise, these headings do describe an approximate chronological sequence of rough strands in traditional thought, and like the term “tradition” discussed earlier, are unavoidable in that they have been extensively used by previous scholars for this purpose. I will thus employ some of them in a loose sense hereunder—taking them on a purely pragmatic and provisional level.

³¹ Sathya Sai Baba (22-1-1960) SSS1 153

In Chapter 3, then, I will consider the antecedents of ideas of the avatars as found in the Vedas, Brāhmaṇas, Upaniṣads, Epics and other ancient traditional works, further focusing in the process upon themes of divine kingship, sacrifice, and cosmogony. I use the term “ancient” here more or less as it is used in Western classical history (i.e. as referring to the period prior to c.500 CE)—again, not because I believe that there is any exact analogy between this period and that which I am considering here, but simply because it is a convenient and well-known designation, and one that has long been applied to Indian history. Similarly, in Chapter 4, I will focus upon “medieval” traditions—although, in line with common Indological practice, I will extend this period up until the time of the ‘full establishment of British rule in the late eighteenth century’³². I include in this period the Purāṇas (although some of them date from just prior to its onset) and some of the more “philosophical” and “devotional” strands of traditional thought. I will also touch upon the early influence of non-Hindu religious traditions, and will adopt a geographical and political focus in considering medieval South Indian parallels to Sathya Sai Baba’s ideas. Finally, in Chapter 5, I will investigate potential “modern” influences upon, and parallels to, Sathya Sai Baba’s divine persona.

I should note that recent work by especially Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman (e.g. 2001, 2006) has identified something of a “modern” mindset operating in certain medieval South Indian settings (see p.293 below), but I am not so interested here in precisely defining what may or may not be “modern” as in formulating a rough and broad chronological periodization within which to consider my material. For my purposes here, taking “modern Hinduism” to begin at towards the end of the eighteenth century (and in northern India) seems to be most appropriate. By then, the influence of modernist Christianity (seeing Christianity as the fulfilment of all other religions, see p.193), modern Western philosophy, industrialization, English education, and a sense of India as a nation-state and Hinduism as a religion all become apparent in our material. There should be little controversy in accepting these as markers of modernity, and I am not aware of much controversy surrounding use of the designation “ancient” in the manner I have proposed, hence using “medieval” to designate the “middle ages” should also be acceptable. I am aware that other, more complex, chronological periodizations have been proposed for these earlier periods of Indian history, but these are tied to political histories to which I have mostly been unable to connect to my material.

³² Introduction to Vanita & Kidwai (2000), cf. Gwilym Beckerlegge (2001:68-69); Sarkar (1997:8ff).

3. ANCIENT ANTECEDENTS

Unheralded by fire and dust, by swooping gale or swallowing floods, the amoeba, in process of time, by the sheer force of the Life principle it embodied, blossomed into goodness and strength of character, into art and music, into song and dance, into scholarship and Sadhana and martyrdom, into sainthood and even Avathars of Godhead!¹

“It was a dark and stormy night....” True to his caste background (outlined earlier) Sathya Sai Baba has something of a penchant for dramatization, and the above passage exemplifies this. Also interesting is the fact that he portrays avatars as the culmination of an evolutionary process—clearly, there are modern influences at work here—I will refer back to this passage in this connection in Chapter 5 (see p.318). But his purpose in presenting this view is far removed from my own concerns in considering the evolution of avatar ideas—he goes on to use the above as an allegory to encourage his devotees to put their faith in the apparently insignificant (amoeba-like) practice of meditation as opposed to the words of ‘loud and noisy men’, who are but a ‘passing phase’ (like the primeval storms). Sathya Sai Baba, as we have often seen to be the case, is keen to make an ethical and spiritual point, whereas my main concern in this chapter is to trace the development of traditional avatar ideas from their earliest determinable origins² to their more-or-less fully-formed flourishings in ancient Sanskrit literature—and not for (merely) dramatic purposes, but (hopefully) to derive some insight thereby into Sathya Sai Baba’s interpretations of them.

Robert Elwood (1987:ix-x), in a foreword to Daniel Bassuk’s (1987b) book, provides some suggestions as to the broader historical context that likely stimulated the formation the first avatar-like concepts:

The doctrine of avatar and incarnation may have ultimate roots in the paleolithic shaman in divine-possession trance, giving human voice to the gods. But its classic expression seems to be rooted in what the philosopher Karl Jaspers has called the Axial Age. This flexibly-defined era of several centuries beginning around the 6th century BCE marks the crucial transition of the human way of being in the world from the prehistoric or that of the archaic agricultural empires to a fresh way in which the individual human, and awareness of human history, comes into focus... there appeared in China Confucius and Lao-tzu, in India the Buddha and Mahavira, in Iran Zoroaster, in Judaea Isaiah and Jeremiah... in Greece a little later Socrates and Plato.

¹ Sathya Sai Baba, DV 24—cf. Sathya Sai Baba (18-12-1966) S6 43:216

² The term ‘origins’ is perhaps a controversial one, but the plurals here are significant. I do not mean to imply any absolute origin; this is a manner of speaking, not a philosophical statement—and it is one that even Foucault would seem to allow (see, e.g., Deal and Beal, 2004, p.94).

Several factors lay behind this era: the discovery or increased use of writing, increased division of labour within society, the stimulus of new intercultural contacts, and on a deeper level, the discovery of history, a slowly dawning awareness that human time is linear, that things change and do not change back.... [T]his realization gives rise... to what Mircea Eliade has called the ‘terror of history’, demanding to be countered by paradigms and controls. Thus the religions of this era made their histories into epics in which God or the gods were acting meaningfully in human affairs. They pointed to eschatological consummations of history... they devised immense cycles overriding the linear movement of experienced time, they sought the high ground of mystical oneness with an Absolute before which all time is contingent or illusory....

[T]he Axial Age... produce[d] that most elite group of all human elites, the half-dozen or so men who have been founders of the great religions.... Inevitably, some have been regarded in faith as Avatars or incarnations of the Divine.

I have already noted something of the influence of traditional ideas of ‘oneness with an Absolute’ upon Sathya Sai Baba and other similar figures, and we will see more of this as we progress. Furthermore, as we will also see, a seemingly incongruous combination of eschatology and cyclical chronology is foundational to some of the avatar traditions—and again is reflected in Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings.

Elwood’s invocation of the Axial Age as the stimulus for these ideas is perhaps plausible³, but a number of factors that he omits—or at least omits to elaborate upon—prove to be equally important, and date from well prior to this time⁴. Thus, whilst he does not expand upon his hint as to the possibility of shamanic influences on avatar ideas, there is certainly a resonance between some specific Indian instances of these and the avatar traditions. Eliade (1958:102,312) notes that the *Ṛg-Veda* (c. 12th century BCE), the earliest linguistic record of Indian religious ideas, describes a shamanic figure (a ‘*muni*’, or “ecstatic”) ‘into whom “the gods enter”’ [*devāso avikṣata*]⁵, and sees general traditional beliefs in the ability of shamans to assume various, but especially animal, forms, as being reflected in leg-

³ E.g., Soifer (1976:130) concludes that ‘there is little doubt’ that ideas from Buddhism and Jainism influenced ideas of the avatar (and vice versa): ‘The early Buddhist *Jatakas* [*sic*] record both the idea of previous Buddhas who in earlier cosmic eras came to earth to teach men the Path.... Jainism, too, posited saviour figures, *tīrthaṃkaras*, who came to earth at low ebb of the cycle of ascendancy and deterioration, to preach the Law [*dharma*]... at critical junctures in time to raise civilization to the next higher stage, as the *avatāra* appears to reinstate the waning *dharma*’ (cf. p.195 below).

⁴ NB J.C.Heesterman (1985:95ff.), however, sees the vedic tradition itself—to which I will make much reference here—especially the sacrifice (see 3.2 below), as an ‘axial [age] breakthrough’.

⁵ *Ṛg-Veda* 10:136. See Bibliography below for sources of this and my subsequent citations of Sanskrit texts. NB Swallow (1982:130-131), also, cites Eliade’s reference to this passage as testifying to potential precursors of Sathya Sai Baba—especially in respect to his ‘magical powers’, including ‘magical flight’. Interestingly, she notes that these figures were ‘popularly associated with sexual license’.

ends told of Gorakhnāth, who we saw to figure in Sathya Sai Baba's spiritual ancestry. And Sathya Sai Baba himself is often described as having appeared to devotees in various human guises and sometimes to have taken animal forms also, appearing as a monkey and as a dog⁶, for instance. Most importantly, however, the motifs of an "entrance of the gods" and a propensity for taking multiple (especially animal) forms are obviously compatible with traditional avatar ideas—as Noel Sheth (2002:100) writes, in various traditional works, there 'are descents in the form of animals, a body that is partly animal and partly human... there are also *avatāras* in the shape of plants ...and of stones'.

In further regard to the latter of these motifs, whilst Elwood mentions above the influence on avatar-like ideas of epic tales of the gods 'acting meaningfully in human affairs', I would suggest that attention be paid to the potential contribution of even earlier mythological traditions personifying natural phenomena and portraying a tendency of especially sky/storm or fertility deities to change themselves into a variety of visible (and often animal or human) forms. The emergence of avatar ideas in India was certainly influenced by the mythology of the "multiform" storm-deity Indra⁷ and his close associate Viṣṇu—another deity with atmospheric associations. The first indications of the incarnational tendencies of these deities come from the Vedas (c.1200-900 BCE), which, as Parrinder (1970:15) writes, are predominantly 'hymns in praise of the gods', wherein:

Indra, the national and storm god, is the favourite of all and he wanders about in many forms. He assumed various forms for his manifestation, and was multiform by his illusions. Indra assumed the form of a ram and a bull, and some of the other Vedic gods appeared in similar transformations.

Soifer (1991:23) cites *Ṛg-Veda* 6:47.18 in this connection—in which the Sanskrit word *māyā* appears as the means by which Indra's 'multiform' [*puru-rūpa*] nature is manifest. Parrinder glosses this term above as 'illusions', but it is perhaps better translated here (after Soifer) as 'powers'. In any case, as we will see (pp.202,243, 384), it plays an important role in later traditions associated with the avatars.

Significantly, as Parrinder (1970:16) notes, in the Vedas, 'Vishnu is often associated with Indra'⁸, and Soifer (1991:22-23) adds that, though the ability to change

⁶ Kura Baker, *Treasured Memories* (Auckland: Sathya Sai Publications of New Zealand), p.19.

⁷ NB Indra is in many ways analogous to the Greek deity Zeus, who also exhibits avatar-like propensities. Both take the form of a bull, are associated with eagles, and defeat major serpentine adversaries (see Hocart (1936:303-304) for a list of other parallels). Indeed, Soifer (1976:139) cites as significant to the early history of avatar ideas 'the shapes Indra assumed to achieve his ends, which [ends] are often sexual in nature'—and this, I might note, provides another parallel with Zeus.

⁸ For details of this association see Soifer (1991), pp.20-23 and Dandekar (1941:95-111) 'Viṣṇu in

form is ‘not very common within the Vedic pantheon’, like Indra:

the Vedic Viṣṇu had this ability too, or at least had another form... Viṣṇu is said to have two forms: one seen, one unseen. ...significantly, ...he takes on another form [*anyarūpaḥ*] when in battle... [this] often being the immediate *raison d’être* for the [later] descent[s] of ...Viṣṇu.

Goldman (1995:84) points out that:

The adoption of a specific guise or change in form by itself is of little theological significance in the world of Indian mythological literature. It is commonplace of these texts and the culture of which they are a part that virtually all superhuman beings—gods, demons, the great serpents, monkeys, etc., as well as highly spiritually adept humans—are represented as *kāmarūpins* or beings capable of changing their forms at will. This power is not correlated with moral capacity or fitness as an object of devotion and thus has little bearing on the concept of *avatāra*.

There is some truth in this. “By itself”, the trait in question here is obviously not sufficient to account for the avatar phenomenon—ideas of the avatar, like most ideas, are undoubtedly multifactorial in their origins—but, it is perhaps a necessary condition for their emergence. Moreover, taking up Goldman’s final point here, I would argue that the earliest traditional antecedents of the avatars themselves show little correlation with moral capacity or fitness for devotion—they are more of the order of displays of (super)natural power, and this is something that all of the forms listed by him do have in common.

In any case, as Soifer (1991:23) goes on to write, it is significant that Viṣṇu takes on several of Indra’s attributes ‘as the latter’s abilities (and popularity) decline’⁹, and Parrinder (1970:16) notes yet other features that made the vedic Viṣṇu well suited to take on his later role as the principle god associated with avatars:

his chief activity in the Vedas consisted in taking three giant strides across the universe, the three realms of earth, air and heaven. Originally Vishnu may have personified the sun, passing through the three realms. He is compared to a dread beast haunting the mountains, or a wide-pacing bull. But all beings dwell in Vishnu’s three wide strides, and his worshippers seek to attain to his ‘dear domain’, which is a ‘well of mead’ (*madhu*), the ‘highest step (*pada*) of Vishnu’.

Here then, in addition to the obvious atmospheric and solar connotations, is a portrayal of an omnipresent yet personified deity, and, as Soifer (1991:24) observes, the strains of devotion towards such for otherworldly ends (most vedic hymns invoke the gods for this-worldly benefits). As we will see, these are key features of some of the later avatar traditions and find echoes in the ideas of Sathya Sai Baba.

the Veda’ in *P.V. Kane Commemorative Volume* (Poona) [cited by Dandekar (1976), p.30,n28].

⁹ On Indra’s “decline” see: Hiltebeitel (1990), p.229ff. and Soifer (1976), pp.139-140.

Various synonyms, homonyms, and derivatives of the above-bracketed Sanskrit terms also prove important to later traditions, and the significance of other details here will become clear as we progress.

In addition to this, as Bharatan Kumarappa (1933:88) suggests, it is perhaps significant that Viṣṇu is, in the *Ṛg-Veda*:

predominantly the friend and helper of Indra. This quality of helpfulness undoubtedly impressed the early worshippers, who began, it would seem, to think of Viṣṇu not only as a helper of Indra, but also as a helper of mankind. He is accordingly said to have thrice traversed the earthly spaces for man in distress.... He is spoken of as a protector of embryos.

This role as a ‘protector’, albeit here in a specific and limited context, perhaps pre-figures Viṣṇu’s later role in taking avatars who come to rescue devotees from distress or to protect good people from harm, themes that we saw to find echoes (and reactions) in Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings (see pp.68ff. above).

This, furthermore, tallies with what I will suggest to be another of the major contributing factors in the early history of avatar ideas—the concept of divine kingship. The king was perhaps the most tangible manifestation of protective power in ancient times, and indeed, as Sheth (2002:116,n2) notes, in many cultures was literally considered to be an incarnate deity. Neither Sheth, nor anyone else that I am aware of, however, connects this with ideas of the avatar in the Indian situation. Indeed, as we will see, the significance of divine kingship in India has in itself been a matter of some debate. Sometimes, reasoning similar to that given by Goldman above is invoked—there are so many deities in Indian religious belief, the argument goes, that the king’s identity as a deity can hardly have been very important. But, again, this is an overstatement—there are, as we will see, mitigating factors, and there is much evidence to the contrary. In the first section of this chapter then, I will present some of this evidence, and seek to link ideas of divine kingship with concepts of the avatar—referring to the Vedas, but also to the Brāhmaṇas (c. 900 BCE, the earliest works dedicated to the exegesis of ritual sacrifice), some of the Śāstras (c. 4th century BCE onwards, treatises on various topics) and the ancient epic tales: the *Mahābhārata* (c. 400 BCE–c. 400 CE) and *Rāmāyaṇa* (c. 200 BCE–c. 200 CE). I will further show that kingship in general (i.e. even if not explicitly divine) acts as a paradigm for some important aspects of various avatar (and other key religious) ideas, including some associated with Sathya Sai Baba.

Similarly, whilst there has not been much in the way of scholarly suggestions to this effect, some aspects of the avatar traditions clearly hark back to ideas of ritual

sacrifice (as described especially in the Vedas and Brāhmaṇas) and I will thus investigate these in the second section of this chapter. As we will see, an understanding of some of the key concepts associated with the vedic sacrifice also sheds some light on general ideas of innovation and change in Indian religious traditions—an area that we saw in Section 1.4 above to have been problematized in relation to Sathya Sai Baba, and one that is obviously of potential relevance to my consideration here of the evolution of avatar concepts.

After this, I will touch on some forerunners of avatar ideas in a number of traditions in which vedic ritualism gave way to speculative, interpretive, and ascetic strains of thought—the Upaniṣads (philosophical “dialogues”, c.700-200BCE) and the *darśanas* (“viewpoints”—especially Sāṃkhya (“Reckoning” c. 5th century BCE) and Yoga (“Unification” c. 2nd century BCE)). Again, we will see that some of the ways in which earlier ideas were modified by these traditions are relevant to understanding the development of avatar concepts. Of particular note are propensities for “interiorization” of earlier traditions and for “distinction”, “enumeration” and “categorization” of traditional entities—which I will highlight by focusin upon ideas of “sixteen marks” of the avatars, the like of which we briefly encountered towards the end of the previous chapter. I will also explore, especially in the third section of this chapter, the relationship between avatar ideas and traditional emanation cosmogonies, noting especially the influence upon these of an ancient Vaiṣṇava sect known as the Pāñcarātra. I will further note in this connection the roots of an idea that is first explicitly formulated in later *advaita* philosophy—that certain scriptural passages, rather than describing ontological verities, are allegories or “explanations” pointing towards the one spiritual truth.

Finally, in the fourth and fifth sections of this chapter, I will focus specifically on the above-mentioned “epic” works, in the fifth section, concentrating upon the *Bhagavad-Gītā*—a part of the *Mahābhārata*, but a separate work in its own right and one that I have already had some occasion to cite. I will also comment upon something of the bardic milieu that was responsible for the production of such works—tying this in to Sathya Sai Baba’s own ancestral links to such a milieu, and to the above-mentioned ideas of sacred kingship.

3.1 Sacred Sovereigns

The Lord is the refuge of all who seek refuge, the saviour of all who have to be saved.... He is now at Puttaparthi as the Effulgent Emperor over the region of Truth, Goodness & Beauty.¹

Sathya Sai Baba sometimes portrays himself as a spiritual emperor, and, whilst the “kingdom” of which he speaks here is clearly “not of this world” (in the famous words attributed to Jesus)², some of his followers act as if it were—McKean (1996:22) cites one observer’s impression:

He looked much as a Maharaja of old must have looked except that he wore no crown. The same disparity between the elevated silver crested throne and the cold hard ground, the same supplicating reverence from the masses.

The ‘disparity’ noted here has more than merely impressionistic significance, for Gonda (1969:21) notes that in traditional cultures in general “powerful” persons or objects are often supposed to lose their (holy) power by direct contact with the earth’, and he sees this specifically reflected in an ancient Indian tradition that ‘the king may not stand on the earth with bare feet’.

Whilst Sathya Sai Baba himself is evidently not an adherent of the first of these beliefs—during the six month period over which I observed him, he rarely made use of the lengthy red carpets that were laid out for him daily, seeming to prefer the cold stone floor—it is significant that he *is*, almost invariably, accorded such “red-carpet treatment” by his followers (or better—as



Fig.12a Sathya Sai Baba seated in the Sai Kulwant hall in regal splendour—on a golden chariot, recalling iconography of the sun-god (below), and under an ornamental parasol, an ancient emblem of royalty (see p.145).



Fig.12b ‘Contemporary lithograph of the Vedic sun god Sūrya’ who, as Rodrigues (2006:56) notes, is ‘nowadays melded with the attributes of Viṣṇu’.

Fig.12a and Fig.13 show). Moreover, as we will see in this section, a number of (other) significant aspects of his persona, and of avatar ideas in general, seem to draw upon, or at least find parallels in, paradigms of ancient Indian kingship.

Fig.12a obviously resembles Fig.12b—an image depicting Sūrya (the sun god) resplendent with regal imagery (chariot, crown) and also with iconography typical of *the* god of avatars, Viṣṇu (i.e. discus, conch, sun behind head), whose solar as-

¹ Sathya Sai Baba (23-11-1975) S13 18:114 [cf., e.g., Sathya Sai Baba (23-11-1985) S18 25:155].

² John 18:36, NIVSB NB On “Truth, Goodness & Beauty”, see p.236 below.

sociations and relationship with kingship I mentioned earlier. John Spellman (1964:13) notes a tradition in the *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* which holds that ‘it is Sūrya who is stated to govern all the world by means of either a good or a bad king’, and Gonda (1954:124,102) writes that ‘Viṣṇu was always connected with the sun’, being considered to reside perpetually therein. Gonda also observes the occasional ‘occurrence of an image of the sun where we might expect an avatāra of Viṣṇu’ and further notes Viṣṇu’s association with the ‘sun-bird’ Garuḍa and his brother Aruṇa, the ‘charioteer of the Sun (Sūrya)... the ‘personification’ of dawn’. Echoes of such ancient associations are certainly in evidence in Sathya Sai Baba’s cult: some of his followers clearly regard him as the “personification” of the Sun—the chariot in Fig.12a is popularly referred to by devotees as Sathya Sai Baba’s “Golden Sun Chariot”, and Kasturi (1985:209), for example, refers to his own occasional duty of holding a parasol [an emblem of royalty, see p.145] above Sathya Sai Baba’s head as: ‘*Carrying [a] Sunshade over [the] ‘Sun’*’.

Another traditional factor connecting the sun with kingship is an association with notions of cosmic order, and these find very significant echoes in the avatar traditions. As Hillary Rodrigues (2006:57-58) describes it:

Among the concepts encountered in Vedic literature is *ṛta*, which may be translated as “the right way,” and is often rendered as “the cosmic order.” ...*ṛta* controlled the way plants grew, rivers flowed, and persons developed. In time, it becomes apparent that alignment with this cosmic order is regarded as beneficial, while to be in discord with it is harmful. The concept of *ṛta* eventually disappears from usage, and is taken up by the term *dharma*. Dharma develops into a notion of individual human and social actions in relationship with the overarching cosmic order. Dharmic action is accord with *ṛta*; undharmic action is not.

But, whilst Rodrigues opines that *ṛta* “disappears from usage”, this is not entirely correct, for Sathya Sai Baba, at least, makes reference to it in the context of the avatars—connecting it, furthermore, with the role of Viṣṇu as a “protector”:

Rtham, rhythm or righteousness is the very breath of Vishnu, for, it sustains the stars, it stabilises society, it ensures advance. Vishnu ...is concerned with sustaining, fostering, stabilising, strengthening. So, Vishnu has to incarnate often in order to save and salvage the world. He has to re-establish *rtham* ...so that the world may be transformed into a Prashanthi Nilayam [(14-1-1970) S10 2:8-9].

The general sense of the concept of *ṛta* is also tied in from ancient times to the institution of kingship. Louis Dumont (1970:73) observes that the *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* [c.900BCE] ‘associates rain and law; rain and order, disorder and drought go together... the rule of an illegitimate sovereign is signalled by drought’, and he

notes a ‘cosmic quality’ of the king, who is ‘often conceived of as married to the earth’. Gonda (1954:165-166) adds that:

It was an essential part of the king’s duty to make rain and to cause the crops to be good... he was responsible for the welfare of his subjects and the course of nature determining it. The same functions were attributed to Viṣṇu who is always concerned with generation and fertility.

And, of course, later ideas of *dharma*, mentioned by Rodrigues above, are central to many of the avatar traditions associated with Viṣṇu, accordingly, as we have already seen, finding echoes in Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar persona (see pp.68ff.).

The avatars are believed to come to uphold *dharma*, which is understood to progressively decline over a cyclical series of “ages” (*yuga*) of the world (see p.204), and, interestingly, some traditional descriptions of the duty of kings seem to prefigure this connection also. Thus, for example, as K.M.Ganguli (Vol.12:196-198) translates: *Mahābhārata* 12:92.6 states that the ‘respective ages called Krita, Treta, Dwapara and Kali... are all dependent on the conduct of the king. It is the king who constitutes the age’; and *Mahābhārata* 12:90 holds that the king ‘should be the embodiment of righteousness [*dharma*] on earth’, and that only a king ‘who upholds righteousness, is truly a king’ (etc.)³. These ideas later come to be directly applied to the avatars. Matchett (2001:188) notes that in the *Harivaṃśa*⁴, ‘there are verses which credit Kṛṣṇa with the royal power of ‘making the *yuga*’ by transforming the present age into the stability and prosperity of the *kṛtayuga*’.

I will revisit these of “ages” at various stages below, but I will note here that the very concept of successive cosmological ages can itself partly be understood as an analogy to the successive reigns of kings. James Black (2005:7-8)—drawing upon some ideas of Eliade—writes that:

the enthronement of a king ...[a]s a ceremony of renewal, it is easily homologized to the cosmogony.... [I]t is often the case that years are reckoned according to the years of the king’s reign, and the enthronement date itself is often the starting point for the civil calendar.

Indeed, in some Indian traditions, the *yugas* are themselves encompassed within a greater cosmological cycle known as a *manvantara*—an “interval between two Manus”, “Manu” being the name of the first post-diluvian king of each cycle⁵.

³ NB These passages evince no knowledge of the avatars (by any name)—the king is not likened to such—and Ganguli (Vol.12:197,n1) writes in regard to the second passage that the orator in the story (Bhīṣma) himself ‘says that this discourse is very old’.

⁴ A “supplement” to the *Mahābhārata* (see p.190,n.40 below).

⁵ NB Hermann Jacobi notes a suggestion that the idea of multiple Manus arose as an explanation for various patronymic epithets [perhaps intended for poetic variety rather than distinction] given to

There is also the obvious analogy here to the above-mentioned natural cycles invoked by the term *ṛta*—to quote Black again:

just as the solar day or year comes full circle with a death and rebirth of the sun, so in this conception does the cosmos return to its beginnings--reduced to primordial chaos, and then created anew.⁶

And this further tallies with what we have seen of the connection between ideas of *dharma*, *yuga*, the sun and kingship⁷. Indeed, Black notes that a consequence of the homologization to which he refers above (of the king's reign and (sacred) cosmological time) is that 'the king becomes in a manner responsible for the stability, the fecundity, and the prosperity of the entire Cosmos'.

This last idea also connects in another way to the avatar traditions. André Couture (2001:314, 319) notes that the 'term *avataraṇa* predates the word *avatāra*' and is especially found in the compound '*bhārāvatarāṇa*', 'the action of taking down a load, removing a burden'. In avatar traditions, the burden in question is invariably that of the Earth goddess, and its remover is usually Viṣṇu, who is called upon to descend from his heavenly abode for this purpose. But this usage recalls some of the traditional laudatory epithets of kings, the 'protectors of the earth' (*mahīpāla*, *bhūpāla* etc.)⁸. Indeed, this linkage was perhaps so strong as to receive an ironic twist in the *Mahābhārata*, in which, as Couture writes: 'As Earth is said to bend under the heavy burden caused by all the kings who walk or drive on her surface, Viṣṇu manifests himself in order to remove (*avataraṇa*) her burden'⁹.

In any case, Viṣṇu is certainly strongly associated with kingship. Gonda (1954: 164-165) reiterates the connection between 'Viṣṇu's protecting activities and his intimate relations with kingship, the first function of which is to protect the

what presumably was a single figure in early tradition (ERE 1:301). On the development of the *manvantara* theory, see also John Mitchiner (1978).

⁶ NB The fiery destructions at the end of these cycles also draw upon ideas of the fire sacrifice. For an analysis of the *yugas* and related cycles see Soifer (1991), pp.59ff. See Cornelia Church (1974: 11ff.) on the general contribution that various cosmological cycles may have made to the formation of the *yuga* theory—for example, Church (1974:11) sees 'some justification for pointing to the phasing moon as a source of inspiration for the Yuga Story'.

⁷ There are also likely connections here between the idea of *yugas* and early astronomical and astrological ideas of cycles associated with the planets and constellations—see, e.g.: J. Chemburkar (1974). On these in relation to (one case of) kingship, see Hildebeitel (1977). See Church (1974:7) for some references to 'traces of the [*yuga*] story' in the Vedas, Brāhmaṇas and Sūtras'.

⁸ See, e.g.: Richard Burghart (1978), p.522; David Smith (1985), p.61, who note traditional descriptions subsuming the role of the king under the term '*bhū-bharaṇa*', "carrying the earth". Smith even connects this with 'sculptures of Viṣṇu's Boar *avatāra*, popular with Gupta kings'.

⁹ This is *Mahābhārata* 1:58.25ff. (= Ganguli Vol.1:LXIV). The king addressed in this section is referred to as '*mahīpāla*' with unusual frequency, perhaps suggestive of deliberate irony.

world'¹⁰, and goes on to note some traditional ‘comparisons between a great sovereign and the god [Viṣṇu¹¹]... both of them ruling the three worlds’¹². He also cites the traditional story of one ‘Prince Puram̐jaya’, ‘into whom the god [Viṣṇu] descends [*avatīrya*] with a portion (*aṃśa*-) of his own being, in order to destroy on earth, all the enemies of the gods’¹³. This is an obvious analogue to what we have already seen of the avatar traditions (and will encounter again below). Gonda (1954:165) further writes that Viṣṇu is ‘often represented on a royal throne’ and that ‘cases are not rare in which kings by erecting statues of themselves in the garb of the god established and confirmed their identity with him’—both of which have parallels in the iconography of Sathya Sai Baba (see, e.g., Fig.13 & Fig.22, p.215).

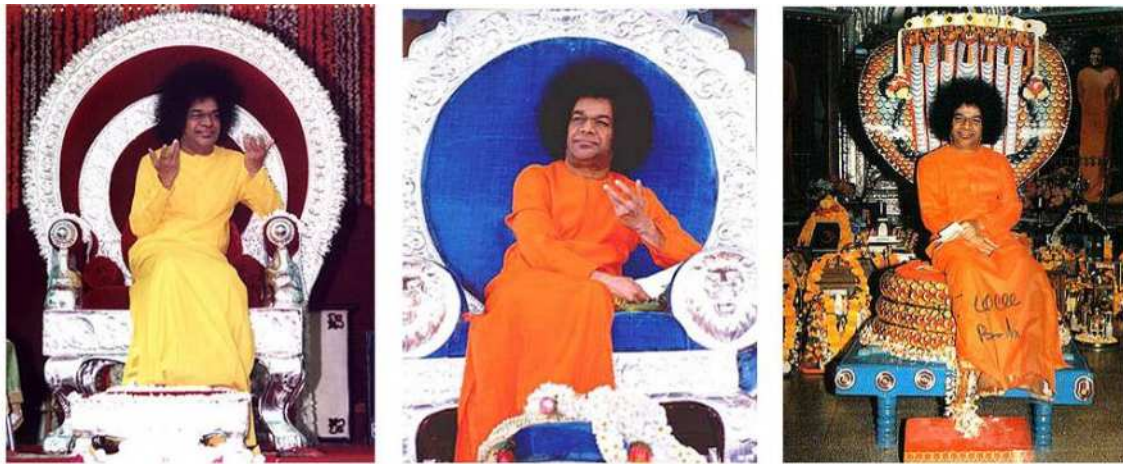


Fig.13 The ‘Effulgent Emperor’ enthroned—again invoking images of kingship and of Viṣṇu in this role. The throne at right is even explicitly modelled on Viṣṇu’s traditional serpent seat.

Of course, none of this is exclusive to Sathya Sai Baba—many contemporary Indian gurus are similarly valorized by their followers—but an awareness of the context in which such practices may have originated can surely only add to our understanding of the same. Gonda goes on to observe that such ‘customs’:

are in harmony with the ideas regarding divine kingship current among other peoples. Ancient civilizations of the Near East likewise admitted that the king and the ‘high god’, or the fertility deity [i.e. like Viṣṇu (or Indra)]... were identical.

¹⁰ For more on this see Gonda (1969), pp.2-6.

¹¹ Indra, of course, would also be a fit subject for comparison here. I noted in the previous section Soifer’s (1976:139) observation of ‘the shapes Indra assumed to achieve his ends, which [ends] are often sexual in nature’, and, interestingly, she goes on to write that: ‘The ends which must be achieved at any cost by Indra are decidedly those of a sovereign whose function is inextricably bound up with fertility and the regulation of society’—concerns of king and avatar alike.

¹² I.e. a development of the “three strides of Viṣṇu” mentioned earlier (p.130 above). Gonda cites the *Mahābhārata*, i.e. dating this to the 4th century CE at the latest.

¹³ This tradition comes from the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, perhaps c.3-4th century CE.

And Sheth (2002:116,n2) adds that in ‘ancient Egypt, China, and Japan, kings were considered gods incarnate’. Moreover, Günther-Dietz Sontheimer (1997:317) notes that ‘In [Indian] folk belief the king also tends to be identified as a god, with all the associations of fertility, heroship and secular and divine powers’. Clearly, this is close to a “universal” of ancient culture.

It is thus surprising that Elwood makes no mention in the passage quoted earlier of the contribution that concepts of divine kingship must have made to avatar-like ideas—all the more so since Bassuk (1987b:164ff.), whose work he is introducing, points to the deification of certain Roman emperors and Jewish Kings as likely contributors to the formulation of early Christian ideas of incarnation. As applied to the Indian context, however, this is not a straightforward matter—Sheldon Pollock (1991:43) notes that: ‘The divine nature of the earthly king has been a matter of dispute amongst students of early Indian thought’¹⁴, and R. J. Zwi Werblowsky (1976:89), avers that the influence of ‘Hindu sacred kingship’:

should not be exaggerated, for, as A.L. Basham (1954, p.86) has put it: ‘divinity was cheap in India. Every Brahman was in a sense a god, as were ascetics with a reputation for sanctity ...If the king was a god on earth he was only one of many, and so his divinity might not always weigh heavily upon his subjects’.

Werblowsky (1976:88) cites this passage in support of an argument that the modern secular state in India as has ‘linkages’ with traditional views, mentioning, especially, the famous *Artha-Śāstra* (4th century BCE), the ‘treatise on ends’, which ‘propounded a purely secular theory of state, of which the sole basis is power’.

There may be something in this¹⁵, but upon investigation, it becomes clear that Werblowsky’s quotation of the above excerpt gives a somewhat misleading impression, for, in its original context, it comes at the end of several pages in which Basham expounds the very real importance of divine kingship in ancient India. Significantly, Basham (1969:81) finds the first evidence of this institution in some early myths in which Indra is appointed as king of the gods in order to assist them in a battle with the demons. We have already seen something of the importance

¹⁴ On the ‘problematic character of kingship’ in India see also Heesterman (1985), pp.108ff.

¹⁵ See Heesterman (1985:128ff.) on the *Artha-Śāstra* in this context. Dumont (1970:67-68) writes that ‘In most societies in which kingship is found, it is a magico-religious function as well as a political function. ...[In] the Indian case, the king depends on the priests for the religious functions, he cannot be his own sacrificer, instead he ‘puts in front’ of himself a priest, the *purohita*, and then he loses the hierarchical preeminence in favour of the priests, retaining for himself power only’. But Dumont (1970:73) nevertheless sees ‘at the core of the idea of [Indian] kingship, elementary notions of a magico-religious nature not ‘usurped’ by the Brahman’. NB On the relationship between king and Brahmin see Gonda (1969), pp.62ff., Burghart (1978), and Heesterman (1985:141ff.)—who comments on Dumont’s argument here. On the ‘divinity’ of Brahmins see Spellman (1964), p.41.

of this motif. Basham (1969:81) further notes that the ancient Hindu rituals preliminary to the coronation of kings contain elements of symbolic deification, and that, during one of these, the king ‘took three steps on a tiger’s skin and was thus magically identified with the god Viṣṇu’. Moreover, Basham (1969:83) writes that even the predominantly “secular” *Artha-Śāstra* ‘recognized that legends about the origin of kingship had propaganda value’. Furthermore, as Basham (1969:85) goes on to write, the *Mānava-Dharma-Śāstra* [*“Manu’s Treatise on Dharma”* (c.1st century CE)] explicitly states that the king is formed of fragments of several major gods¹⁶, so that he ‘surpasses all other beings in splendour’. We have already seen Sathya Sai Baba refer to himself as a sort of super-god, a conglomerate of all conceivable forms of divinity, and I noted that this has precedents in traditional accounts of the avatars (see p.119).

Another important connection comes as both Werblowsky (1976:88) and Basham (1969:83) observe that Buddhist tradition portrays the miraculous birth and auspicious bodily marks (*lakṣanas*) of the Buddha as being equivalent to those of an ‘All-conquering Emperor’ (*Cakravartin*). Whilst Werblowsky juxtaposes this with what he argues to be the comparative insignificance of *Hindu* sacred kingship, we may note that there were (both later and earlier) Hindu equivalents of this idea¹⁷. Indeed, Gonda (1954:165) points out the traditional belief that: ‘All paramount sovereigns bear a portion of Viṣṇu’s personality’ and notes that Viṣṇu himself ‘is also a *cakravartin*’¹⁸. We will see some echoes of this in Sathya Sai Baba’s persona shortly, and we saw earlier that he claims to, or is believed to, possess the ‘marks’ of *cakra*, conch, and *śrīvatsa* (see p.72 above)—each of which are included in most traditional lists of the above-mentioned *lakṣanas*.

Whilst, as Werblowsky’s above-quoted excerpt indicates, deities were certainly common in ancient India, I would argue that it does not necessarily follow from this that divinity was thereby ‘cheapened’. Kings were themselves common in ancient India and, as Basham (1969:84) himself notes, some kings were elevated above others of their kind. Thus they were accorded such titles as *Rājārājā* or *Rājādhirājā*, “King-of-kings”, or *Mahārājā*, “Great king”¹⁹. Similarly, as we will see, some traditions explicitly posited gradations of divinity amongst avatars, or gave them titles such as *Devadeva* or *Devādhideva*, “God-of-gods”, or *Mahādeva* “Great

¹⁶ On the significance of this, see Gonda (1965), p.133.

¹⁷ E.g., Basham (1969:83) mentions this. See also Gustav Roth (1987), pp.295-296,309,n.23.

¹⁸ On the term *cakravartin*, see also Gonda (1969), pp.123ff.

¹⁹ For more on traditional gradations of Indian kingship see Spellman (1964), p.64ff.

god". If divinity was cheap in ancient India, it was certainly not uniformly so, and even the earliest traditions attest to crossovers of divine and royal epithets. Indra and other gods are referred to as 'rājā' in the *Ṛg-Veda*, and Pollock (1991:43) notes vedic passages in which, kings are called 'not only "half gods" [*ardha-deva*]... but also "gods among men" [*devo martyāt*]²⁰. Other terms with dual divine and kingly associations are: *Nātha* ("Protector"); *Deva* ("Illustrious One")²¹; *Śrī* ("His Majesty", nowadays an honorific applied to distinguished men in general); *Īśvara* ("Lord", an important epithet of Śiva, and more generally of the Supreme Being); and *Svāmī* ("Master"). Sathya Sai Baba and other gurus are commonly addressed by this last term, and in fact, Sathya Sai Baba is regularly worshipped with various combinations of almost all of the above-cited terms²². In addition to this, I would point out that, whilst it is true that, from an *advaita* viewpoint, every person, and indeed every object has a claim to divinity (as Basham (1969:86) puts it 'even sticks and stones might be alive with inherent godhead'), this has not stopped certain persons (and indeed certain objects) from being esteemed as especially sacred—albeit that this seems paradoxical. And kingship is evidently a major paradigm by which such consecrations take place.

Angelika Malinar (2001:99) sees a paradox of Śaṅkara's *advaita* teaching in the fact that it was taken to confer upon him the 'special status' of *jagadguru* ("World-Teacher") and/or that of avatar. She writes that in some hagiographical accounts:

Śaṅkara's task [i.e. as avatar²³] involves an intellectual 'conquest' of the different regions of India... [a] *dig-vijaya* ['victory over the (four cardinal) directions']... an enterprise traditionally ascribed to a king²⁴. In fact, Śaṅkara is projected as having performed what had once been part of the Vedic ritual of the consecration of the king, the *digvyāsthāpanam*, the 'mounting of the quarters of space'.

Sathya Sai Baba, whilst not precisely duplicating this feat, is certainly aware of it²⁵, and early in his religious career, made journeys with a large entourage to sacred spots over almost the entire length and breadth of India. Furthermore, significant events are said to have occurred at key locations.

At Cape Cormorin in the extreme South (Fig.14), the ocean is believed to have

²⁰ For references to the Sanskrit terms here (and some others) see Spellman (1964:27,39).

²¹ On these epithets see (and cf.) Gonda (1969), p.4 and p.24 respectively.

²² E.g.: 'Raja Rajeshwara... Raja Dhi Raja... Sai Maharaja... Deva Dhi Deva' (SBM 329).

²³ As we saw earlier (pp.68ff.), avatars typically come with a definite mission to accomplish.

²⁴ See Smith (1985:65ff.) Smith writes: 'impossibly many kings were credited with world conquest by their willing poets. It was essentially a magical view of the world, devoid of military feasibility'.

²⁵ See his discourse on 6-9-1996 (<http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/d960906.html> [23-11-2006]).

magically offered a ‘pearl garland’ at his feet²⁶, and, as Haraldsson (1997:193) reports, on a beach near Dvārakā (named after a legendary abode of Kṛṣṇa) in the extreme West (Fig.14), devotees recollect that ‘straight from the sands He brought out a beautiful, glittering Lord Krishna playing on the flute – magnificent – a



Fig.14 Cardinal locations



Fig.15 Golden Sands — Sai “creates” a statue of Kṛṣṇa on the beach at Dvārakā.

statue of solid gold of about a foot high’ (Fig.15). Moreover, interestingly—in light of what we have already seen to be his affinity with Śaṅkara—he made a point of visiting at least two of the major temples associated with this figure: Badarīnāth, in the extreme North; and Śrīsailam, the ‘Badri of Peninsular India’ (Fig.14), supposedly performing magical rituals before the astonished priests of each for purposes of ‘multiplying the potency’ or ‘charging the battery’ of the idols therein²⁷. And he explicitly correlates the former of these instances with his avatar identity and with relics of Śaṅkara’s *dig-vijaya*:

Shankaraachaarya brought five lingams from Kailaas and installed one each at Dwaaraka, Sringeri, Badhri and Puri [i.e. at the (approximate) extremes of the four cardinal points in India (Fig.14)] and the fifth he placed at Chidambaram²⁸ [Fig.14]. Of these, the one at Badhri has the Naaraayana *amsam* (orientation) and that had to be consecrated afresh. That was My task... I had to accomplish it this year itself, for this is the 35th year after this *Avathaar* took birth and this is also the year when the 35th successor to the Shankaraachaarya *Peeta* is at Shringeri.²⁹

An account of Śaṅkara’s supposed retrieval of these *liṅgams* from Kailāsa—the traditional mountainous (heavenly) abode of Śiva—is given in a traditional work known as the *Śivarahasya Mahetihāsa* [“Great History of the Secret of Shiva”]³⁰.

In this last regard, it is possible that Sathya Sai Baba is seeking in the above to

²⁶ Sathyam-1 12:192 [p.202 in some versions] (cf. Sathyam-1 8:105); Haraldsson (1997), p.92.

²⁷ Sathyam-2 3:27-31; Sathya Sai Baba (4-7-1961) S2 11:47 [See also Vijayamma (nd), p.61ff.]

²⁸ Cf. <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/d960907.html> [14-6-2007]

²⁹ Sathya Sai Baba (4-7-1961) S2 11:46-47 NB *Pīṭha*, means ‘chair’ or ‘office’ in the sense of ‘position as head’; ‘-aachaarya’ (*ācārya*, cf. p.165,n.14 below) means ‘teacher’ (often affixed to Śaṅkara’s name, but, as Malinar (2001:93) notes, the heads of his monasteries ‘are also called Śaṅkarācārya’); ‘amsam’ (*aṁśam*) means “portion”—the idea presumably being that each of these *liṅgams* embodies a portion of the five major deities worshipped today by followers of Śaṅkara. That Sathya Sai Baba should single out for his attention a portion of divinity associated with Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu) is another indication of what I have suggested to be his significant (and early) affinity for this figure.

³⁰ Sathyam-2 3:28, citing the ‘XVI chapter of the IX Section’ of this work.

legitimate his “task” (i.e. his identity as an avatar) by a simple appeal to traditional authority. But a devotee’s account of Sathya Sai Baba’s journey to Badarīnāth in the Himalayas (Fig.14), leaves no doubts as to the combination of regal and divine imagery invoked by the occasion. Vijayamma (nd:3-4,42) speaks of ‘*Sri Sathya Sai Shatchakravarthy*, the Lord of all deities and embodiment of all ‘*Salakshanas*’ (echoing the terms mentioned earlier³¹) and further refers to Sathya Sai Baba as ‘*Samrat*’ (“overlord”)—another term with the sense of either divine or worldly supreme sovereignty³². She also speaks of Sathya Sai Baba’s ‘Royal Splendour’, and describes his arrival in Delhi, enroute to Badarīnāth, as follows:

“*Bhagawan Sri Satya Sai Baba ki Jai,*” “*Sathya Sai Maharaj Ki Jai,*” the elated cries of devotees, coming from the railway carriages were rending all the four quarters like the brass bells, drowning even the sound of the train. Jubilation every where [*sic*], happiness was ruling all over.

Of course, these regal epithets (all of the above)³³ and imperial imagery (‘rending all the four quarters’; ‘ruling all over’; ‘ki Jai’, which means ‘victory to’) are probably for the most part unconsciously expressed, but this attests all the more to the great antiquity and depth of the traditional symbolic linkages involved.

Returning to the implications of *advaita* for ideas of divinity, I would add that, whilst we have seen (and will especially see in Section 4.3 below) that Sathya Sai Baba often invokes Śaṅkara’s *advaita* philosophy, as in the case of hagiographical representations of Śaṅkara himself, it does not seem to follow from this that his divinity is thereby cheapened. He has attracted a huge following, most of whom accord him special status—despite his repeatedly avowals that all persons are “divine” (see p.234). Indeed, I would argue that the model of supply-and-demand that Basham invokes above itself entails this conclusion³⁴. If Brahmins, guests, parents, cows etc. were gods, they were gods of a lesser and more common variety than kings, so kings ought naturally to have been more esteemed in this regard.

³¹ ‘*Shat*’ here is perhaps derived from the Sanskrit *śata* ‘one-hundred’—i.e. ‘a large number’—magnifying the term *cakravartī*, however, in an instance in which Sathya Sai Baba applies this term to himself, his translators render it as ‘*Sath-chakravarthi*---the King of Kings’ [S14 14:97 (23-11-1978)]—which would suggest the Sanskrit ‘*sat*’ – ‘true’, i.e. ‘the true emperor’. Similarly, Vijayamma (or perhaps her translator) renders ‘*Salakshana*’ here as ‘good qualities’—i.e. *sat-* [*sal-*]*lakṣana*, but *sa-lakṣana* ‘possessed of (auspicious) marks’—such as those just mentioned (p.139 above)—would be another possibility. Alf Hiltebeitel (1990:198-199,202) notes that sometimes ‘virtues are interchangeable with “physical marks.” ...In other cases, however, physical marks and moral excellences clearly seem to complement each other’. But, either way, he goes on write that ‘the phrase “endowed with every virtue” is [itself] primarily a royal epithet’.

³² I.e.: *samrāt* ‘a universal or supreme ruler’ but also an epithet of various Vedic deities (MW).

³³ Excepting ‘Bhagavān’—I am not aware of any case in which this epithet is applied to kings.

³⁴ Cf. Pollock (1991), p.46-47.

Furthermore, the charisma and martial power adhering to the office and extraordinary upbringing and/or prowess of a king must have set him far apart from these other divinities. Pollock (1991:43,49) recalls the ‘strong concomitance between authority and the supernatural in *pensée sauvage* [“primitive thought”]’, and cites the ‘sacred status of the king elsewhere in the Indo-European cultural domain’ as further evidence of this. He even quotes a tradition which states that: ‘The king is twice so great as a brahman’.

To be fair, Basham’s argument is for the most part based on some historical examples which do indeed indicate that the divinity of kings was not taken at face value in a variety of circumstances³⁵. But it is ideology with which we are most concerned here, and in this regard, as Pollock (1991:40) writes: ‘the documentary evidence [for divine kingship] becomes overwhelming’³⁶. Pollock (1991:48) cites the story of a traditional king by the name of Pṛthu as being ‘[p]erhaps the best representation of the doctrine of substantive identity between king and divinity’:

Viṣṇu entered into the king, so that the world would bow in homage to these gods of men, like very gods.... For why otherwise would people stand at the bidding of a king who is no different from them in his body or sense powers—were it not for this quality of divinity? ...When his merit is exhausted, a king comes from heaven to earth to be born.... wise men have forever declared that gods and gods of men [*na-radeva* – i.e. ‘kings’] are equal.

This, by now, needs little comment, but other parts of this myth prove to foreshadow ideas of the avatar in more subtle ways.

The story begins with a description of ‘the Krita age’ in which at ‘first there was no sovereignty’, for ‘[a]ll men used to protect one another righteously’, until:

they found the task (after some time) to be painful. Error then began to assail their hearts... the perceptions of men ...came to be clouded, and thence their virtue began to decline. ...all of them became covetous. ...And because men sought to obtain objects, which they did not possess, another passion called lust (of acquisition) got hold of them. ...another passion, named anger, soon soiled them. ...they lost all consideration of what should be done and what should not. Unrestrained sexual indulgence set in. Men began to utter what they chose. All distinctions between food that is clean and unclean and between virtue and vice disappeared. When this confusion set in amongst men, the Vedas disappeared. ...Righteousness was lost.³⁷

The idea of a sequence of degradation—with each “error” necessarily entailing a more serious fault—finds parallels in the avatar traditions (e.g. *Bhagavad-Gītā*

³⁵ See also Spellman (1964), pp.40-42.

³⁶ For more such evidence see Spellman (1964), p.26ff.

³⁷ Ganguli, Vol.12, p.122.

2:62-63), and of course the ultimate outcome, loss of *dharma*, is a primary motive for the descent of avatars. Indeed, this passage could easily sit alongside later traditions describing the evils of the fourth and final *yuga* of the world, the Kali-yuga ‘Black-age’, in which we are presently believed to be living and which, as we will see, the likes of Sathya Sai Baba claim to have come to remedy.

But, in this case, the remedy is not the advent of an avatar—despite the fact that the story goes on to say: ‘the gods were possessed by fear’³⁸. ...they sought the protection of Brahma’ (this being another major motif of the avatar traditions). Instead, Brahmā composes ‘a treatise consisting of a hundred thousand chapters’ treating of all subjects (but especially the duties of kings). After this, a succession of deities and ṛṣis study it before teaching it (in a very concise form) to Pṛthu, ‘that one among mortals who deserves to have superiority over the rest’:

the gods that were present there, as also the Rishis, said unto him. ‘Do thou fearlessly accomplish all those tasks in which righteousness even resides. ...do thou punish with thy own hands the man, whoever he may be, that deviates from the path of duty. Do thou also swear that thou wouldst, in thought, word, and deed, always maintain the religion inculcated on earth by the Vedas. ...and pledge further that thou wouldst protect the world from an intermixture of castes.’

As we have seen, these are major traditional tasks associated with the avatars³⁹, most of which are adopted or adapted by Sathya Sai Baba. Perhaps significant also, is the idea of such teachings being passed down by a chain of divine and kingly transmitters but suffering ‘general decrease’ over time before being taught to the best of men. This we will see paralleled in Kṛṣṇa’s explanation of the origin and significance of his teachings in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (see p.193).

And the parallels continue as we are told that ‘the surface of the earth had before been very uneven. It was Prithu who made the terrestrial surface level’. “Levelling the earth” we will see in the next section to be a defining activity of a major precursor of one of the avatars of Viṣṇu, the Boar—who, moreover, is often found associated (or identified) with kings (especially in inscriptions and sculptures)⁴⁰. Furthermore, in later traditions, Pṛthu himself is explicitly identified as both king and avatar (see p.214 below), and he is not alone in this. Whilst Alf Hiltebeitel (2003:128) cautions that it is possible (after Madeleine Biardeau) to see ‘the avatāra as the “divine model of the king”’ rather than vice versa, the traditions that I

³⁸ Presumably, this is fear of ‘redeath’ (see p.154 below); they go on to say ‘we are about to descend to the level of human beings’ [i.e. a loss of divinity—not becoming avatars].

³⁹ For the ‘mixture of castes’ in this context see *Bhagavad-Gītā* 1:41-42; 3:24.

⁴⁰ See, e.g.: G.S.Ghurye (1962), pp.146-147; and p.286 below.

have cited in this section lend little support to this interpretation (at least as applied to the earliest phases of this phenomenon). In ascribing avatar-like features to kings, they generally show no awareness that these features are “avatar-like”. Surely, if the avatar-traditions were being employed as a model here, there would be many explicit attempts to liken kings to avatar figures. It is true that, as Hildebeitel (2003:128) points out, ‘not all avatāras are kings’, but a further suggestion he makes—that ‘Rāma is unique amongst Viṣṇu’s major avatāras in being a king’—is simply untrue. Kṛṣṇa too, is surely such a figure, and I would note that even the Vāmana avatar, who is usually portrayed as a Brahmin, is often depicted as carrying a parasol—this, as I have mentioned, and as Deborah Soifer (1991:124-125) shows, being emblematic of royalty.

In this particular case, Soifer notes that the sunshade presents a symbolic linkage between Vāmana (as Viṣṇu) and Indra (as the king of the gods)), and, interestingly, Gonda (1954:165,n5) writes that the ‘umbrella’ is also traditionally portrayed as an object ‘typical of the... function... and character’ of the Sun god—who we also saw to have ties with Viṣṇu. Moreover, as Gonda (1954:167) observes, these ties are further mediated through an epithet of Indra, *maghavat* [“munificent one”], which ‘is mystically identical with’ *makhavat* [“companion of Makha”](MW)⁴¹—Makha being an epithet of Viṣṇu identifying him with the sun and also, significantly, as we will see in the next section, with the vedic sacrifice.

Finally for this section, I would note that A.M.Hocart (1936:291), from a cross-cultural comparative study of the structure of mythological prototypes of kingship, hints at another significant figure that connects in here. He sees an archetypal ‘Earth-snake-king’ as the ‘Tribal executive’ of the ‘Sky-king’—the latter role, whilst being identified by Hocart as being filled in the Indian scenario by Indra, also resonating, as we have seen, with the figure of Viṣṇu. In accordance with this, Bassuk (1987b:99) sees a ‘mytheme’ of avatar ideas in the association of many avatars, both traditional and modern, with a ‘Divine Serpent’:

In India the cobra is regarded as a very special creature ...its hood which looks like a crown, ...gives it the appearance of royalty. The hood of the cobra is portrayed as polycephalous (i.e. comprised of many heads⁴²).... In the Hindu imagination the cobra and the Avatar are both manifestations of the one divine substance.

Significantly, Bassuk notes a claim by devotees that Sathya Sai Baba’s advent was

⁴¹ See also Soifer (1990), p.31.

⁴² NB Bowen (1985:154) notes that a ‘five-headed’ cobra, often depicted in idols connected with Sathya Sai Baba, ‘has historic links with ancient artefacts, thought to be of Dravidian origin’.

heralded in his infancy by the appearance of a large cobra under his bedclothes⁴³.

H.Daniel Smith, K.K.A.Venkatachari, and V.Ganapathi (1969:208), writing of traditional iconology, further note that:

the deathless⁴⁴ (an + anta), serpentine form known as Ananta... is never very far away from his Master. Wherever the Lord goes, Ananta serves as the many-hooded protective umbrella [i.e. as a symbol of kingship]; whenever the Lord sits, Ananta serves as the seat; whenever the Lord reclines, Ananta serves as the couch.

We earlier saw something of the presence of images of Viṣṇu's serpent couch in Sathya Sai Baba's cult (Fig.13; see also Fig.22) and may also note that hagiographical material often portrays him as giving "visions" to devotees of himself as 'Mahavishnu, sitting on the serpent couch'⁴⁵. To this I would add that Sathya Sai Baba is even said to have appeared to some of his early devotees in the form of a divine serpent (*nāga*), later himself installing an idol in a temple constructed by them on the spot where this manifestation is supposed to have taken place⁴⁶. A devotee describes the appearance of this 'Naga Sai' as follows:

We saw a huge snake approaching us. ...And this was not an ordinary snake! It looked verily like Adi Sheshu, the Serpent King upon whom Lord Vishnu reclines. ...As it advanced a little, its head was suddenly transformed into the strikingly beautiful countenance of our Lord Sai [ASN 56-57].

The associations with Viṣṇu are patent, although it is interesting that this serpent is not portrayed as polycephalous—if this were mere hagiographical extravagance one might expect it to more closely echo the above-noted symbolism.

But, whatever its relationship to actual events may be, this is something of a minor theme in Sathya Sai Baba's persona. More commonly, as we have seen and will further see, he aligns himself with the avatars of Viṣṇu, rather than with Viṣṇu's heavenly, serpent-reclining, form. We will see another example of this shortly, as we progress to consider ancient Indian sacrificial traditions. We have seen in this section that the avatar traditions have significant antecedents (and/or parallels) in traditional paradigms of kingship, and that these are reflected in Sathya Sai Baba's divine persona.

⁴³ This supposed event is described, for example in ECM 22

⁴⁴ Serpents are associated with immortality and "infinity" symbolism in many cultures, being regarded as "deathless" due to repeatedly sloughing off their skin—appearing to survive bodily death.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., LIMF 168.

⁴⁶ Sathya Sai Baba (26-2-1961) S2 1:5

3.2 Ritual Resemblances

Tomorrow, between eight and nine in the morning the *Poornaahuthi* or the Valedictory Offering in the Sacred Fire will take place. That is a precious moment in every *yajna*; the full and final offering is considered the fulfilment of the ritual. But here, you must keep one fact in mind. I am not getting this *yajna* done; I am He who receives the offerings of *yajna*.¹

Sathya Sai Baba proclaims that it is important for his devotees to know that he is the recipient, rather than the sponsor, of the offerings of an annual week-long vedic sacrifice that is performed at Prashanthi Nilayam. In this, although he does not make this explicit here, he draws upon his persona as the avatar—for *Bhagavad-Gītā* 9:24 has Kṛṣṇa aver: “I am the recipient (*bhoktā*) and the very lord (*prabhu*) of all sacrifices (*yajña*)”. But the antecedents of this idea stretch back to the Vedas—many of the hymns of which are used as specific accompaniments to ritual sacrifices to this day. As Parrinder (1970:15-16) writes:

The nearest of all the Vedic gods was Agni, the sacrificial fire. With him occurs the image, popular in later religion, of conveying men in a ship across the sea, away from sin.... [W]ith Agni is seen the merging of the gods into one: ‘You, O Agni, are Indra... you are wide-striding Vishnu... you are king Varuna... you are Rudra... you are Savitri’, and so on. It would be natural to identify the mediating fire with other divinities, but a ‘tentative monism’ appears here and there. In the first book of the Rig Veda an unidentified neuter One is called by the names of various gods... ‘*That which is One the seers speaks [sic] of in various terms*’.

Agni, the sacrificial fire personified, is thus in some sense the “recipient of all sacrifices”, and, in being elevated to the status of the one-and-only god, further anticipates the claims of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and Sathya Sai Baba in this respect. Furthermore, as Parrinder intimates, there are other important continuities in Indian traditions that derive from Agni. We will see in Chapter 5 that Sathya Sai Baba uses a “ship” metaphor to explain his role as the avatar, and he also often uses another important traditional metaphor of which Brian Smith (1989:106) writes in connection with Agni—that of a ‘chariot, the vehicle of choice in Vedic India’.

Soifer (1976:129) picks up on the potential relevance of the “merging of the gods” to ideas of the avatar, pointing out an observation by R.G.Bhandarkar that:

The conception that the supreme spirit manifests himself in various forms [i.e. as avatars]... is a development, in the opposite direction, of the idea that one God, for instance Agni, is the same as Varuṇa, Mitra, Indra and Aryaman (RV V. 3.1-2). If these several gods are one, one god may become several.

This, however, is speculative. We have seen Sathya Sai Baba paralleling earlier traditions in demonstrating the opposite tendency—presenting himself as a some-

¹ Sathya Sai Baba (1-7-1962) S2 46:262-3

thing of a “merging of the gods”—and we will see similar ideas in relation to traditional avatar figures hereunder.

In regard to Agni’s identification with the gods, Parrinder’s claim of a “tentative monism” is problematic, more so than he admits, for Smith (1989:79) observes that one of the officiating priests at the sacrifice is also ‘said “to be” the fire god Agni’ but points out that this is a case of ‘resemblance’ rather than identity—‘the relation of a cosmic prototype [Agni] to a ritual counterpart [the priest]’. In the same way, the sacrificial fire itself (for the most part) acts as a ritual counterpart for the various deities (as cosmic prototypes)—without any monistic implications. But this is perhaps a step in the direction of monism, and *Bhagavad-Gītā* 9:23 (the verse preceding that just quoted), rather than implying that offerings to one deity are offerings to all other gods, has Kṛṣṇa proclaim: “even those devotees of other gods who sacrifice to them with faith, worship me alone”. This too finds its way into Sathya Sai Baba’s persona, for, as we have seen, he proclaims that: ‘worship of the Lord in any form, in any name, is worship of Sai’². His point in this case is to discourage ‘factious’ (i.e. factional, sectarian) rivalry (‘why argue with another that Sai is supreme’), a theme that we have also already noted in his teachings, but the philosophy he employs for this purpose is clearly monistic. For him, as we saw earlier (p.73), ‘all these names [of deities] represent the One Atma. True worship consists in regarding all the forms as one’.

Smith does not comment upon the vedic verse to this effect cited by Parrinder above, but I would note that this verse certainly is taken by some later traditional works³, and by some “Neo-Hindus”⁴, as an affirmation of monism. Sathya Sai Baba presents it in this manner, and also connects it with the purpose of avatars:

“*Ekam sath Vipraah Bahudhaa vadhanthi*” (There is One only; the wise call It by many names).... To propagate this great truth to the world, from time to time many sages and saints and *Avathaars* made their advent in Bhaarith [India].⁵

There are a number of other, similar, vedic hymns that may have contributed to later monistic ideas⁶, and I would note that the spirit of this passage is also in keeping with traditional portrayals of Śaṅkara as an avatar—Sathya Sai Baba is

² Sathya Sai Baba (23-11-1966) S6 42:209

³ This is *Ṛg-Veda* 1:164.46, which, for example, *Brahma-Purāṇa* 158.27 takes in non-dualistic terms.

⁴ E.g. Vivekananda calls this verse ‘one of the grandest truths that was ever discovered’ (Halbfass, 1988, 231). On Vivekananda in general see Halbfass (1988), pp.228ff; William Radice (ed.) (1998).

⁵ (14-10-1995) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume28/sss28-26.pdf> [3-5-2006]

⁶ See, for example, W.Norman Brown (1966:28ff.), who discusses in this context *Ṛg-Veda* 10.129—another hymn in which monistic ideas are ‘explicitly developed’.

perhaps invoking authority from traditional sentiments in this respect, although no traditional work explicitly connects the verse in question here to the avatars.

There are, however, other vedic hymns that certainly did directly influence the avatar traditions. D.D.Kosambi (2002:387), writing on the ‘oldest sources’ of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, points in this regard to:

the proclamation of Vāgābhṛṇī ...[the author of] RV.x.125. She declares herself the bearer of all the chief gods, the mover of all, filling earth and sky. Similarly Vāmadeva, perhaps speaking as Indra, in RV.iv.26 starts off by identifying himself with Manu, Sūrya, Kavi Uśanas, Kakṣivān, Kutsa Arjuneya. The tone of the first sūkta [hymn] is familiar to readers of the *Gītā*, while the first three of Vāmadeva’s identifications occur in the tenth adhyāya [chapter] of the same work.

This, again, involves the motif of the “merging of the gods” (and of various elevated human/divine or sagely figures like Manu, who I mentioned earlier). Another hymn in which this motif appears is noted by Parrinder (1970:16) to have ‘special significance’ to ideas of the avatar. Importantly for our focus in this section, this latter hymn again ties in with ideas of ritual sacrifice, portraying the cosmogonic power believed to inhere in this mode of worship.

The hymn in question is the ‘Hymn of Man’, [*Puruṣa-Sūkta*, *Ṛg-Veda* 10:90], which describes a ‘cosmic giant’, the ‘lord (*īśāna*) of all’:

This cosmic giant is sacrificed by the gods⁷, and from him came all things; animals and the four castes of men, the gods Indra and Agni and others....

*Purusha is all this, that has been and will be ...
A quarter (pāda) of him is all beings,
Three quarters are the immortal in heaven ...
With three quarters Purusha rose upwards,
One quarter came to be here again.*

Parrinder (1970:17) observes that it is the last two lines here that are most suggestive, but notes that the avatar traditions which refer to this hymn do not quote these lines. And, in accordance with this, Sathya Sai Baba—whilst sometimes expounding the first two lines of the passage quoted here⁸, and occasionally interpreting the latter two—does not explicitly connect them with the avatar-idea⁹.

⁷ NB As a partial insight into why ‘the lord of all’ might be sacrificed we could perhaps adduce Freud’s suggestion, noted by Smith (1989:173-4), that, whilst sacrificial victims are typically ‘consciously the substitute for the sacrificer... the victim was also an unconscious representation of or substitute for the deity, the figure of authority, the idealized, all powerful father figure’. And for Freud, of course, myth is akin to dream in revealing the contents of the unconscious mind.

⁸ See, e.g., Sathya Sai Baba (11-10-1972) S11 47:305

⁹ NB Sathya Sai Baba turns them, rather, to the service of philosophy (e.g. DV 7-44), using terms that echo traditional understandings (cf. Victoria Lysenko (1997), p.422; Gonda (1989), p.63

He does, however, invoke his avatar persona in quoting a portion of this hymn (the opening lines) upon which Parrinder does not see fit to comment¹⁰. Again, this is mediated by the *Bhagavad-Gītā*:

My feet are everywhere. *Sarvthaah paani paadham*---“In all places, His Hands, His Feet” says Geetha [sic]. The *Purusha Suuktah* of the *Vedhas* says: *Sahasra Seershaa, Purushah, Sahasraakshah, Sahasrapaadh*---“The Supreme Sovereign Person has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes and a thousand feet.” The heads, eyes and feet of the thousands who gather here, are My Heads, My Eyes and My Feet. Nurse them, respect them, attend to their needs [(4-3-1970) S10 6:30].¹¹

The point of this verse in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, as is evident from the verse preceding it, is to give a description of *brahman*, “having known which, one attains immortality (*amṛtam*)”. Since the same end is attained in the vedic “original” by means of the external act of ritual sacrifice (*R̥g-Veda* 10:90.16), this might be called an “interiorization” of tradition. I will discuss this in detail in the next section, but will note here the fact that Sathya Sai Baba’s usage further modifies the purpose of this passage—he presents an “ethicization” of this tradition (via a combination of traditional and rational authority), using it to promote the ideal of social service¹².

The verse in question is *Bhagavad-Gītā* 13:13, and R.C.Zaehner (1969:340) comments that this verse ‘is lifted straight out of ŚU. 3.16’ [i.e. *Śvetāśvatara-Upa-niṣad*]. Other verses of the *Puruṣa-Sūkta* are also echoed in this latter work, and parallels between them and yet other works suggest that there may have been several earlier intermediaries between even this work and the vedic “original”¹³. But, whatever the precise chain of influence, the presence of the *Puruṣa* idea in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*—indubitably the most important of avatar traditions—is patent. And there are other potential paths for the influence of this idea upon the avatar traditions. S.M.Srinivasa Chari (1994:208), drawing upon traditional interpretations put forward by the philosopher Rāmānuja (11th century CE), writes that:

¹⁰ NB Parrinder (1970:17) does, however, note that the *Puruṣa-Sūkta* contributes in a more general way than that mentioned earlier to the development of ideas of the avatar, and in fact he does footnote in this regard the *Bhagavad-Gītā* verse quoted by Sathya Sai Baba here.

¹¹ NB His point in this passage is to assuage his devotees’ hankering for personally offering ‘service’ to—his feet (i.e. foot massage, the chance to provide which is treasured by devotees). Interestingly, he elsewhere uses reasoning derived from the *Bhagavad-Gītā* verse in question here in an attempt to keep his devotees on their best behaviour: ‘You cannot hide anything from God. Many imagine that Svaami does not see what they are doing. They do not realise that Svaami has a myriad eyes’—Sathya Sai Baba (27-2-1995) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume28/sss28-14.pdf> [7-3-2007].

¹² NB As Halbfass (1988:240-241) notes, ethical interpretations of traditional ideas, whilst having a few forerunners in medieval metaphysical tracts, are especially characteristic of “Neo-Hinduism”.

¹³ See, e.g., Max Müller (1884), pp.244,n6;247,n2. NB To trace all the details of such connections is not important for my purposes here—it is the general sense of such developments that I am after.

the *Puruṣa-sūkta*¹⁴ states: ‘(The one) who is not born takes many births.’ The implication of this Vedic statement is that the Supreme Being, though He is not subject to normal birth with the physical body, assumes different manifestations for the good of the world.

Rāmānuja, however, was well aware of avatar ideas from other, much later, sources, so is most likely simply reading back this idea into this early work. Even a translation of this verse by a modern follower of Rāmānuja interprets it (following Sāyaṇa) in cosmogonic terms—as averring that the ‘Puruṣa does not need to be born to manifest himself as all’ and yet ‘gives birth to all’¹⁵. And none of the later avatar traditions of which I am aware (aside from Rāmānuja’s interpretation), make any reference to this verse. Still, the fact that Rāmānuja did make such an interpretation highlights a general traditional sense of the compatibility of this figure with ideas of the avatar, and indeed, as we will see in the next chapter, in some traditions the Puruṣa comes to be explicitly identified as an avatar.

We have a long way to go before we reach this stage; our route—and that of the Puruṣa—passes through a group of traditional works known as the ‘Brāhmaṇas’, compendia of mythologies and liturgies relating to sacrifices. Soifer (1991:29-32) notes some precursors of the avatars therein:

Written roughly around 900 BC, the Brāhmaṇas were composed by priests to explain, in great detail, “the meaning and purpose of the Vedic ritual....” ...Viṣṇu becomes associated and even identified with the sacrifice in the Brāhmaṇas.... Viṣṇu, as sacrifice, is sacrificed by the gods to create the sacrifice... the fate of Puruṣa in RV X.90. ...Importantly, what follows almost immediately after the identification of the sacrifice with Viṣṇu is that of Viṣṇu with the Puruṣa.... In this significant identity, several basic characteristics of avatāric Viṣṇu may have had their roots... a cosmogonic function like that of the primeval Puruṣa and, tied to this, the *viśvarūpa*, the all-encompassing form, from which emanates all of creation....

Through his identification with the sacrifice and Puruṣa, Viṣṇu is seen to have a close association with another deity identified with these two, Prajāpati. This link is of special significance for the development of specific avatāras; notably the tortoise and boar. For Prajāpati becomes a boar and strokes the earth... “spreading her out so that she became extended.” ...this idea of expanding... easily connected with the expanding and pervading aspects of Viṣṇu. The tortoise also is said to be Prajāpati... significantly this tortoise encompasses the three worlds in its shell....

The significance of much of this ought already to be apparent, and that of the other aspects here will unfold as we progress.

Dandekar (1979:186) gives some more detail pertaining to the last reference in

¹⁴ NB Srinivasa Chari cites the ‘Yajurveda recension’ of this hymn [i.e. *Vajasaneyi-Saṃhitā* 31:1].

¹⁵ V. Sundar, <http://www.ramanuja.org/purusha/sukta-6.html#3> [5-3-2007]

this passage. He cites *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* 7:5.1.1ff., in which:

the universe is compared to a tortoise.... The lower shell of it... is this terrestrial world; and the upper shell of it is the yonder heaven. For, the yonder heaven has its ends, as it were, bent down [i.e. forming the “dome” of the sky]. And what is between the shells is *antarikṣa* [the atmosphere].

The tortoise thus gains significance through its apparent resemblance to the cosmos¹⁶, and its encompassing the three worlds further resembles the defining deed of Viṣṇu—who strides across the (three) worlds. Moreover, Gonda (1954:127) writes that the tortoise is described as ‘lord of the waters’, and ‘is also able to exert fertilizing influences’—motifs which tie in with what we have already seen of other figures associated with the avatars. Spellman (1964:216) notes in addition that: ‘The natural element that was most intimately connected with the dharma of the king was water’, and furthermore quotes the *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* to the effect that ‘the waters are the law (Dharma)’. Indeed, as Kosambi (2002:380) writes, in the earliest rendition of the myth that would become that of the Tortoise avatar (on which see p.179 below), ‘the tortoise is not there as *avatāra* of any deity, being merely the great tortoise-king’. Again, the identity of “king” transforms into that of “avatar”, and I would add that the *viśvarūpa*, the “universal-form” mentioned here, is known in later tradition as the “virāṭ” (“sovereign”) form—another example of a crossover between regal and avatar epithets.

Of the other major deity mentioned by Soifer above, W. Norman Brown (1966: 23) writes: ‘Prajāpati, which means “Lord of Creatures,” ...is an obvious heiratic [sic] invention’. He cites a vedic hymn which attributes to this figure:

deeds and distinctions... elsewhere regularly ascribed to Indra: the making firm of earth and sky; rulership of the gods; the bestowing of victory upon one of two rival armies; the release of the waters; the inauguration of the sacrifice; the status of sole, that is, supreme god.

The first of these connects with the ideas that we encountered earlier of the (divine) king “levelling the earth”¹⁷, and especially that of *bhārāvataṛaṇa*, removing the burden of the earth, both of these resembling the natural tendency of boars to root up the earth in search of food. Indeed, the definitive task of the Boar in the mature forms of its myth is that of uplifting the earth from the primordial waters. The figure of Prajāpati (as a boar) perhaps thus assimilated via these traits something of the shape-changing tendencies of the storm/fertility deities identified ear-

¹⁶ See also John Brockington (1998:279).

¹⁷ See Gonda (1969:107-108) for more on traditions of kings “spreading”, “expanding” or “extending” the earth, and pp.100-101 (in the same work) on “broadness” as a major trait of the earth.

lier. In Indian tradition the boar also evidently has solar associations¹⁸, and these perhaps further connected it (and/or Prajāpati) to Viṣṇu¹⁹.

As Soifer (1991:64) writes, the boar is also ‘the symbol of the sacrifice par excellence, the parts of whose body are analogised to the different parts of the sacrifice’²⁰ (presumably due to its mundane counterpart being a commonly apportioned victim thereof) and these points obviously connect it (and so Prajāpati) with the cosmic *Puruṣa*. Indeed, Smith (1989:55-58) writes that:

Like *Puruṣa*, who is “this all,” Prajāpati is also described as “all”.... But just as *Puruṣa* was not restricted to his pantheistic immanence (he is said to be one-quarter here, three-quarters beyond), so too is Prajāpati said to be yet more than the manifest. ...He is both the gods and men, the divine and the human, the mortal and the immortal; he is both the defined and the undefined... the limited and the unlimited.... Prajāpati, alone and stricken with desire for offspring or for company, “emits” (*srj-*) or emanates from himself the creatures.... Prajāpati is the vital life force ...of his creation or its soul (*ātman*).

Smith also notes that [like Agni] Prajāpati is portrayed as ‘the summation of all the gods’, and this connects him to the *viśvarūpa* mentioned above by Soifer. Displaying this ‘universal form’, becomes a common mode of theophany in avatar traditions—down to and including those propagated about, and by, Sathya Sai Baba.

The Sanskrit terms in the passage just quoted from Smith are also significant to the avatar traditions (see p.196), and provide an early forerunner of upaniṣadic and advaitic descriptions of *ātman/brahman*—Smith (1989:69-70) later observes:

Like Prajāpati/*Puruṣa* the *brahman* is said to create and pervade “this all”.... “*Brahman* is the whole, complete here, is what is entire, perfect, with no parts lacking....” As such, the *brahman* is not different from Prajāpati himself.²¹

As Gonda (1989:63) notes, ‘the *ātman* concept comes in the early *upaniṣads* indeed to be identified with the *Puruṣa* idea’, and several early traditions testify to the ‘identification of *Puruṣa* and *Brahman*’. There thus seems to be an ancient and integral connection between ideas of a spiritual “absolute” and these significant forerunners of the avatar traditions.

Other such “identifications” were also important, however. Freda Matchett (2001:5) observes that in the *Brāhmaṇas*:

Puruṣa Nārāyaṇa is given as the name of the self-offered victim in the great cosmic

¹⁸ See V.S.Agrawala, *Solar symbolism of the Boar: Yajña varāha* (Varanasi: Prithivi Prakashan, 1963).

¹⁹ NB On boars, see: Gonda (1954), p.129; Aditya Malik (1994), p.285; Maheshwari Prasad (1973).

²⁰ See also Prasad (1973), p.43.

²¹ On this see also Gonda (1989), pp.38ff.

sacrifice.... Nārāyaṇa came to be regarded as the seer who composed this hymn. ...the ṛṣi [seer] who composed the *Puruṣa sūkta* may have been assimilated to the Puruṣa whose praise he had sung, and thus himself became the object of a cult.

And Parrinder (1970:25) points out some further precursors of the avatars that connect with (especially the sacrificial associations of) this figure. He writes that ‘Vishnu appears as a Dwarf (*vāmana*) in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa’ and that he ‘is connected with the sacrifice at Kurukshetra’. He also writes that in the *Taittirīya-Saṁhitā* [a portion of the *Yajur* (“Sacrifice”) *Veda*], ‘it is said that when the gods and demons were struggling for the world, Vishnu sacrificed to himself in the shape of a dwarf and so conquered’²². These are important, for, as we will see: later traditional accounts of the avatars are invariably based upon a struggle between gods and demons; one avatar specifically takes the form of a dwarf; and another is closely associated with a great battle—portrayed in terms of a sacrifice—at Kurukṣetra, the ‘domain of the Kurus’ (an ancient royal dynasty).

There is also a close connection between “sacrifice” and the idea of *dharma*, for Soifer (1991:64) notes that the term ‘*ṛta*’ (which we saw above to be the immediate precursor of this term) is also used ‘in the religious sense as sacrifice or “rite”’. The implication is that through sacrifice/battle *dharma* is restored—a major theme of later avatar traditions. Furthermore, Smith (1989:118) points out precursors in the sacrifice of some other important ideas—*viz.*: *karma* [reaping consequences befitting one’s “actions”], and rebirth [*punar-janma*]:

Like the law of *karma*, Vedic ritualism is premised on the assumption that acts have consequences for those who act, both in this life and in the future... however... at this point in the orthodox tradition, the only acts that matter, that provoke ontological reactions, are ritual ones.

And he notes that ‘in some of the Brāhmaṇas there is a fear of “redeath” (*punar-mṛtyu*) when the ritually acquired merit that has sent the disembodied sacrificer to heaven runs out... [causing] resurrection and repeated death’. The similarity to the well-known later concepts of *karma* and reincarnation²³, which we will see to have some resonance with ideas of the avatar, is obvious.

The above-mentioned theory of Smith (1989:31) on connections via “resem-

²² NB In explaining the ‘dwarf’ form, Parrinder cites ‘a belief [of many traditional cultures] in the magical power of dwarfs’ as significant, and there may be something in this, but it may also be relevant that, as F.B.J. Kuiper (1977:217-220), notes, the sacrifice of a deformed, (by analogy with later traditions) perhaps dwarven, (and brahmin) scapegoat, ‘the impersonation of the god [Varuṇa]’, was prescribed in some texts of this era to be undertaken ‘at the end of the horse sacrifice and in conclusion of the purificatory bath’.

²³ For more on this see Smith (1989), p.206-207 and Paul Deussen (1966), pp.328ff.

blance” between early (sacrificial) traditions and later ideas is relevant here:

The quintessentially Vedic system of “equations,” “equivalences,” “homologies,” or “connections”—all possible translations of the Sanskrit word *bandhu*—unites the ritual texts (*Samhitās*²⁴, *Brāhmaṇas*, and *Sūtras*) with the more explicitly mystical, speculative texts (*Āraṇyakas*²⁵ and *Upaniṣads*). There is an epistemological affinity between typically *Brāhmaṇical* and ritualistic declaration such as “The sacrifice/sacrificer is the year” and typically *Upaniṣadic* and mystical statements such as “The true self (*ātman*) is the universal principle (*brahman*).”

An analysis of the very names by which Vedic texts are known seems to indicate a common theme underlying differences in genre. *Brāhmaṇa*... designates texts “where the function is precisely to establish connections,” ... “The word *upaniṣad* itself, as it is first used in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, means only ‘equivalence...’.”²⁶

We have already encountered several of the potential translations of ‘*bandhu*’ given by Smith here, and a few more besides—viz.: “correlations”, “correspondences”, “meldings”, “assimilations”, and “mergences”, for instance. “That which is one, scholars speak of in various terms”, we might say—excepting that, for Smith at least, the above terms are not equal, and, as mentioned earlier, the process to which he sees them as referring is not fundamentally one of identity.

Smith (1989:48,47,73) notes that these *bandhus* are conceptualized in a hierarchical fashion, analogous to the caste system, and thus argues that the first three of his above-cited terms imply too strongly *identity*, ‘which Vedic thought... usually found abhorrent’. Hence, he opts for ‘connection’, ‘correspondence’, or ‘coordination’, and suggests that the relation in question be termed ‘hierarchical resemblance’, elucidating this as follows:

Vedic connections are of two sorts: what we might call vertical and horizontal correspondences. The former connects an immanent form and its transcendent correlative.... This type of connection operates between the elements of the same species located on different and hierarchically ranked cosmological levels. Horizontal connections link resembling components of two different species located within the same cosmological plane which share a similar hierarchical position within their respective classes.

Of course, such connections are (proto)typically made in the context of vedic ritual

²⁴ I.e. the “compiled” forms of the Vedas—attributed to Vyāsa, fabled author of the *Mahābhārata*.

²⁵ NB As Dandekar (1979:339) writes “The *Āraṇyakas* may be said to have been regarded as independent Vedic texts only by courtesy. Actually they represent but a kind of continuation of the *Brāhmaṇas*, textually as well as conceptually. They mark the transition from the ritualism of the *Brāhmaṇas* to the spiritualism of the *Upaniṣads*. ...most of the *Āraṇyaka*-texts form the concluding portions of some of the *Brāhmaṇas*, they have... some of the *Upaniṣad*-texts either imbedded [*sic*] in or appended to them. The *Āraṇyakas* seek to present the true mystique of the ritual by glorifying the inner, mental sacrifice as against the external, material sacrifice.

²⁶ NB For later, more common, meanings of term *upaniṣad*, see Dandekar (1979), pp.341-342.

sacrifice, but, as Smith (1989:202ff.) later shows, this context persists in a more subtle form in many later traditions.

He writes that it is best to view:

yajña in the history of post-Vedic Indian religious not so much as a ritual act or set of acts (the purpose of which might be constructive, expiatory, propitiatory, purifying, cathartic, etc.) but rather as a *category that acts to provide explanatory power, traditional legitimacy, and canonical authority*.

Here, “explanatory power” recalls Weber’s idea of “legal-rational authority”, and “traditional legitimacy and canonical authority” are variations upon his concept of “traditional authority”. And we may note in what we have already seen, several examples of “resemblance” being used in this manner (albeit not specifically related to the sacrifice). Thus, we saw (p.141) Sathya Sai Baba horizontally connect his 35 years on earth (as a deity) to the fact of there having been 35 successive heads of his local monastery (as a sacred institution), manufacturing legitimation for his actions by imbuing them with a type of legal-rational authority (the subtext being that “if the numbers add up, it must be so”); and we saw that both he and Śaṅkara are horizontally connected to the ideal kings of old—invoking traditional authority, but the result is the same. Or again, we earlier saw Sathya Sai Baba horizontally connect himself to previous avatars (and earlier still specifically to Kṛṣṇa), enabling him to defend himself against his critics by drawing upon the traditional authority of stories associated with them.

Such resemblances evidently also contributed to the development of traditional ideas of the avatar. The majesty of the king and the extraordinary powers of the shaman connect them vertically with the gods, and the cosmic order (*ṛta/dharma*) connects vertically with the (law-enforcing) kings—whose successive reigns in turn connect to vertical counterparts in the form of the cyclical “ages”. The great conflagrations (*pralaya*) that are believed to draw these ages to a close are sometimes conceptualised as vertical counterparts of the sacrificial fire (for obvious reasons) and *ṛta* also, is vertically connected to ritual sacrifice (the most orderly of activities). The sacrificial fire (as the recipient of sacrificial offerings) is furthermore vertically connected to all the gods; and “all the gods”, in turn are connected vertically to their progenitors Prajāpati and Puruṣa. These major deities become horizontal counterparts of Viṣṇu (perhaps through their shared trait of pervasiveness), who is horizontally connected to Indra through shared properties and activities. Moreover, through the rapid changes in form characteristic of the weather, and through other properties (encompassing the three worlds, being apportioned in a

sacrifice etc.) all of these deities are vertically connected to a variety of animal forms that would later come to be seen as avatars.

The origins of the avatar traditions are all but accounted for in this; for their fulfilment, in addition to “connections”, some genuine “identifications” are perhaps required, and the means and impetus towards the formation of such was provided by subsequent traditional developments. After the Vedas and Brāhmaṇas, the next major group of traditions relevant to our concerns are the Upaniṣads (c.700–200BCE), primarily philosophical works, in which there comes to be an increasing emphasis on ideas of “identity”. We will encounter the legacy of these ideas as we progress, but the (ancient) Upaniṣads themselves contain very little that can be seen as prefiguring the avatars. A claim that Sathya Sai Baba makes in this regard is thus largely incongruous: ‘5,600 years ago in the Upanishads. The coming of Baba, the Sai Avatar, which includes the three incarnations, is all forecast quite clearly’²⁷. No Upaniṣadic passage that I have come across could be construed as containing such a prediction, although the Upaniṣadic literature is sufficiently vast and heterogeneous so as not to preclude the existence of some such passage in some version of some text. Some of the medieval “Upaniṣads” do make reference to some avatar traditions²⁸, but Sathya Sai Baba is evidently referring to (traditional dates for) the earliest Upaniṣads—an appeal to traditional authority augmented by emphasizing the antiquity of these traditions.

In addition to an emphasis on “identification”, the Upaniṣads highlight a traditional propensity for “interiorization” of tradition²⁹. We encountered something similar above with “knowledge of *brahman*” acting as an equivalent—in terms of granting immortality—to a ritual sacrifice associated with the Puruṣa, and to give another, even stronger example of interiorization involving this figure, I would point out a similarly intentioned passage in *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 3:13:

The Person [*puruṣa*] of the measure of a thumb, the Inmost Self,
Forever dwells within the hearts of men...
Whoso knows this becomes immortal [*amṛta*].³⁰

Here, the “cosmic giant” is reduced to “the measure of a thumb” and situated in “the hearts of men”, and immortality is gained through knowledge rather than sacrifice. Both of these changes can be considered to be “interiorizations”.

²⁷ C (1968-78) XXXVII 101

²⁸ E.g., the *Kṛṣṇa-Upaniṣad* (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/achintya/message/7178> [3-3-2007]).

²⁹ On this see, e.g., Smith (1989), p.194, 209-11.

³⁰ Zaehner (1969), p.343.

“Interiorization” is particularly evident in a tradition known as “Yoga” (“Unification”, i.e. of self and deity)³¹, the earliest dedicated exposition of which is the *Yoga-Sūtra* (c. 2nd century BCE). Eliade (1958:106) notes this especially in connection with ‘one of the most typical yogico-tantric techniques... [viz.] producing inner heat’—‘*tapas*’. Interestingly, in light of what we saw at the start of this chapter, he writes that the origins of this idea are ‘probably connected with shamanistic ideology’ and that *tapas* was a prescribed accompaniment of some of the vedic sacrificial rituals: ‘Sacrifice was early assimilated to *tapas*’. He also hints at a possible connection here to avatar-like ideas:

Tapas is clearly documented in the *R̥g Veda*, and its powers are creative on both the cosmic and spiritual planes; through *tapas* the ascetic becomes clairvoyant and even incarnates the gods. Prajāpati creates the world by “heating” himself to an extreme degree through asceticism... [and] was himself the product of *tapas*.

I might add that, in the case of King Pṛthu, who we saw above to “incarnate” the god Viṣṇu, this is said to have been achieved ‘*tapasā*’—i.e. through (Viṣṇu’s) *tapas*.

Various aspects of Yoga have certainly influenced Sathya Sai Baba and his followers. One of his early Western devotees was Indra Devi, ‘America’s foremost Yoga authority’³², who taught Yoga classes the world over, spreading awareness of Sathya Sai Baba’s persona and teachings as she went. Moreover, a recent hagiographical work portrays Sathya Sai Baba himself as at one time taking over her sometime role as Yoga-teacher at his ashram, instructing some of his followers daily for ‘nearly a month’ in early 1969 in such physical exercises as are commonly understood in the West today by the term “Yoga”. Sathya Sai Baba devotee Vijayakumari (1999:326-7) writes:

Having Sai Eswara, the Lord of Yoga, as our teacher was the result of our good deeds in ever so many past lives.... Oh God! How easy was Padmasana [the “lotus posture”] for Him? We were about thirty devotees there [*sic*]. When we tried Padmasana, our limbs refused to move, and our knees refused to bend. While we were wrestling with our bodies, Swami would burst out laughing and sit happily in Padmasana.... Folding His arms behind the back, He would bend down to the floor. He appeared to have no bones at all in His body.... When He demonstrated, we

³¹ Gonda (1977:204,n156) writes that: ‘This definition, though historically incorrect, is often found in Indian works’, and it is the definition that I have most commonly come across, hence my usage of it here. Zaehner (1969:139) notes that, in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, Yoga is often mentioned alongside Sāṃkhya, and suggests that their names are best translated in this regard as ‘practice’ and ‘theory’ respectively. I would suggest “method” (in the sense of “applied theory”) to be a better alternative to “practice”, for Yoga has its own strong theoretical component—even if this sometimes differs only in minor ways from Sāṃkhya. Cf. Eliade (1958), p.148.

³² Indra Devi (1969) NB See, especially, Indra Devi, *Sai Baba and Sai yoga* (1975).

thought, ‘Is that all?’ But when we actually tried it, it was very difficult [*sic*]. Of note here is Vijayakumari’s identification of Sathya Sai Baba with Īśvara (Śiva)—who is commonly depicted in *padmāsana*, the cross-legged ‘lotus posture’ (Fig.16b)—and is indeed traditionally referred to as *yogeśa*, ‘Lord of Yoga’³³. I might note, however, that a similar epithet (with a more-or-less identical meaning) *yogeśvara*, is traditionally used to refer to Kṛṣṇa—this identity is clearly an important one for Vaiṣṇava (avatar) traditions too³⁴.



Fig.16a Sai in *Padmāsana*. Note the tiger skin and ‘*rudrākṣa*’ rosary—icons of Śiva (Fig.25b).



Fig.16b Statue of Śiva: sitting on a tiger-skin mat; *rudrākṣa* beads around his neck.

Interestingly, given that we noted above the common identification of the sun with the sacrifice and Yoga to be the “interiorization” of the same, Vijayamma (2000:328-331) goes on to portray Sathya Sai Baba as demonstrating and expounding the yogic exercise known as ‘Surya Namaskaram’ [Salute to the Sun], describing him as ‘the Sun God Himself... Sai Bhaskara’. She also writes of him as teaching ‘Pranayama (breath regulation)’ and accompanying some of the postures that he demonstrates with the appropriate traditional ‘mantra’ [chant]—these being other cornerstones of what is known as “Haṭha Yoga” (the “forceful method”). Eliade (1958:318) notes that it is Gorakhnāth who is ‘regarded as the “inventor” of Haṭha Yoga’, and, whilst this technique has since been adopted by a wide variety of traditions, this may be significant—given the place, noted earlier, of this figure in Sathya Sai Baba’s background. Indeed, Nāthism historically had a strong presence in Sathya Sai Baba’s geographic locale, so may have had a direct influence upon him. Chandaka Sri Krishna (2004:155), in a recent PhD thesis on *kuṇḍalinī* concepts in Sanskrit and Telugu literature, writes that:

yōga and *yōgic* culture appear to have flourished in the Āṇḍhra area as early as the Sūtra Period (600 B.C.). ... In [the] Āṇḍhra region the influence of [the] *nātha* cult

³³ NB Śiva is also traditionally referred to as ‘*yogīśvara*’—i.e. ‘Lord of *yogīs* [practitioners of yoga]’.

³⁴ See, e.g., *Bhagavad-Gītā* 18:78.

is undisputable. ...The religious rites and practices of this region were deeply hued with Nādhism [sic³⁵].

And as Gonda (1977:221) rather bluntly puts it in regard to the Nāths: ‘Their highest aspiration is to become God in their present bodily existence’, something that perhaps resonates with Sathya Sai Baba’s claims to the status of deity. It is clear, at least, that he is well versed in *yoga*.

In this regard, it is noteworthy that, in his early years, Sathya Sai Baba evidently spent quite some time living in isolation in a small cave. Padmanaban (2000:237) writes that to avoid criticism of his Brahmin hosts for allowing him to stay in their house, he:

moved away to some caves in a hill... He stayed there for some time—probably six months [with no food or water (264,n10)].... [The villagers] were under the impression that Baba was performing some austerities to obtain powers.³⁶

He also evidently had with him a small copy of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (which text, we may thus suppose, and indeed have already seen, to be an important key in understanding his views)³⁷. He may even have had a *guru*, for we are told that:

at the behest of Seshama Raju [his eldest brother], Raju [Sathya Sai Baba] would regularly carry food for a holy man who stayed in a cave in the surrounding hills. Raju subsequently became very attached to the holy man [LIMF 160,n54].

But Sathya Sai Baba himself makes not reference to such a figure—his take on the traditional institution of guruhood is predominantly the interiorized one that we encountered earlier (p.81).

We have seen in this section, then, something of the influence of the Upaniṣads, of Yoga, and of the earlier sacrificial traditions that they often interiorize, upon Sathya Sai Baba’s ideas. Most important, is the traditional episteme of resemblance posited by Brian Smith—we will see throughout this study that it underlies many significant developments in the history of the avatar traditions and in Sathya Sai Baba’s continuation of the same. We will also see more of the Upaniṣads, especially in the next section, as I progress to consider a number of other important traditional processes (and works) that find echoes in Sathya Sai Baba’s thinking and/or in traditional representations of avatar ideas

³⁵ NB Sri Krishna and some of the other (amateur) South Indian scholars to whom I will refer often employ non-standard and/or inconsistent (roughly phoneticized) transliterations of Indian words.

³⁶ Cf. Pedda Bottu (2005), p.262.

³⁷ NB Anti-Sai activists have picked up on such stories as counter-evidence to Sathya Sai Baba’s claims to divinity (e.g., <http://www.saiguru.net/english/articles/48sbshivsadh.htm> [19–2–2006]).

3.3 Emanations, “Explanations” & Enumerations

A seed is planted in the earth. It sprouts, grows into a tree puts forth branches, leaves, flowers, buds and fruits. Wherefrom have these different manifestations come? All have come from the seed. The ancients realised from this fact that although the tree presents multifarious forms and names, the source is one only. The seed, from which the various manifestations have emerged, proudly declares: “*Tath-Twam-Asi*” (All of you have emanated from me).¹

In this passage, Sathya Sai Baba is presented (via a parenthetical editorial gloss) as advocating something of an emanation cosmogony². On the page immediately prior to this, however, his editors give a literal translation of the Sanskrit aphorism cited here: ‘That Thou Art’ (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6:8.7), a traditional interpretation used in *advaita* philosophy as a stock affirmation of the non-duality of Self and Godhead³). Indeed, Sathya Sai Baba himself, invoking the doctrine of *māyā* (as “illusion”), elsewhere says that ‘The Universe’ only ‘appears to have emanated’, and casts this “apparent” emanation in typical *advaita* terms as being ‘but super-imposed ideations upon the One modificationless Reality’⁴.

As Jaqueline Suthren Hirst (1984:253) notes, in Śaṅkara’s *advaita*, on the topic of cosmogony especially: ‘*Māyā* ...implies a certain agnosticism about mechanics’⁵. Suthren Hirst (2005:112) writes that Śaṅkara was liable to refer to any traditional cosmogony as a type of parable, an ‘*arthavāda* [lit. “explanation”] ...a secondary passage, which may or may not describe things as they are, but whose primary purpose is not in its description but in that to which it points’. She cites a case in which Śaṅkara’s (rhetorical) opponent says of one traditional cosmogony (of which Śaṅkara has just presented an interpretation): ‘Is this not nonsense?’ Śaṅkara, never one to cast aspersions on the validity of scripture, replies: ‘There is no problem here. All this is an *arthavāda* because what is desired to be expressed is only the understanding of the self’. As Suthren Hirst (2005:124) puts it, ‘the manifesta-

¹ Sathya Sai Baba (23-5-1991) S24 9:91-92

² E.g. Charles Long (2006) cites a ‘seed’ as a typical metaphor of emanation in various cultures.

³ See Sharma (2000:178) on the meaning of this aphorism in *advaita* (and other) interpretations.

⁴ SSV 219 NB “Superimposition” is a widely used English translation of the Sanskrit term *adhyāsa* (or *adhyāropa*)—common in *advaita* writings. Śaṅkara’s use of this concept, as Hacker (1995:121, 95,59) notes, seems to be a generalization of earlier usage in Yoga philosophy, where it referred to ‘the superimposition of the functions of the inner sense on the self’. Śaṅkara adopts, and greatly emphasizes this particular meaning, but also applies the concept in the general sense referred to by Sathya Sai Baba above—superimposition is ‘false cognition’ (*mithyājñāna*), by which the (in reality) attributeless (*nirguṇa*) *brahman* appears to have attributes (etc.).

⁵ As Suthren Hirst (2005:94) puts it, ‘Śaṅkara is really interested in the current bondage of the human condition, the psychological, not in how the world came to be, the cosmogonical’—nor, I would add, is he (or Sathya Sai Baba) interested in the ontological—except in denying dualities.

tions [i.e. progressive emanations] of the Lord in the cosmos provide a reversible structure pointing beyond themselves to the ever pure free non-dual brahman’.

Accordingly, I would suggest that Sathya Sai Baba’s primary purpose in invoking such cosmogonies, rather than to assert the veracity of any particular cosmogonic process, is to point to the “truth” of non-dualism—to indicate that, in spiritual sense, there is “one only”. Indeed, later in the discourse from which the passage at top is taken (p.96), he refers to another passage from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6:1.2) that confirms this: ‘seek to know That by knowing which all else is known, by having a vision of which everything else can be seen.... That one thing is the *Atma-Tattwa* (*Atma-Principle*)’. Wilhelm Halbfass (1988:413-414) describes the upaniṣadic context of this verse:

The sun, the moon, fire, and so forth, are traced back to being [*sat*] itself; they are explained as being contained in it, as emanating from it, and ultimately as identical with it.

The above-noted editorial gloss on Sathya Sai Baba’s use of *tat tvam asi* is thus in congruence with this context; it is significant that this aphorism comes from the same chapter of this Upaniṣad. The ‘seed’ metaphor employed by Sathya Sai Baba above, however he may have intended it to be taken, clearly is predicated on a cosmogony (whether “real” or “apparent”) by emanation, and, as we will see, such cosmogonies abound in traditional works.

In fact, whilst Sathya Sai Baba does not explicitly link this emanation cosmogony to his avatar identity, he is perhaps invoking here a traditional cosmogonic aspect of this identity, for the seed metaphor recalls a famous declaration of Kṛṣṇa (*Bhagavad-Gītā* 7:10) that Sathya Sai Baba elsewhere cites: ‘I am the Seed of all Beings’⁶. It also resonates with the role of the cosmic Puruṣa—who, in the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, as Matchett (2001:180) notes, is described as ‘the only seed of hundreds of *avatāras*’, and who, as we will see, acts as a template for a number of traditional emanation cosmogonies. Moreover, the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* explicitly identifies the Puruṣa as an avatar; the earlier cosmogonic role of this figure presents an obvious point of resemblance to the Dwarf, Boar, and Tortoise avatars. Matchett (2001:180) writes that, in the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*:

the Cosmic Man (*pauruṣam rūpam*)... is ...called ‘the primal *avatāra*’... the first revelation of God in the cosmos, which serves as the ground plan and material cause of creation, and from which spring all other beings.

The Puruṣa thus becomes both an avatar and the ‘seed’ of other avatars, whilst at

⁶ See, e.g., Sathya Sai Baba (5-10-1970) S10 24:150

the same time retaining its vedic character as creator of all (other) beings.

As we saw in the previous section, a major motif of the *Puruṣa-Sūkta* is sacrifice—the *Puruṣa* is sacrificially apportioned into the various major constituents of creation—and we also saw that this motif was developed in subsequent traditions, often in connection with the figure of *Nārāyaṇa*, with whom the *Puruṣa* was from early times identified. Further to this, as John Brockington (1998:290) writes, the *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* ‘says that *puruṣa* *Nārāyaṇa* performed a *pañcarātrasattra* (sacrifice continued over five [*pañca*] days [*rātra*])’, and *Nārāyaṇa* lends his name to a section of the *Mahābhārata* known as the *Nārāyaṇīya*—which especially expounds the views, including an emanation cosmogony, of an ancient sect known as the *Pāñcarātra* (perhaps deriving its name from the above-mentioned sacrifice)⁷. Brockington (1998:291) writes that: ‘One of the distinctive doctrines propounded in the *Nārāyaṇīya* is the fourfold nature of the Supreme Being’, and this motif harks back to the *Puruṣa-Sūkta* (see p.149 above). The *Nārāyaṇīya* foreshadows the later (purāṇic) interpretations of the *Puruṣa* by having the primal deity create avatars, and/or the entire universe, by a process of emanation, through successive divine manifestations. Brockington (1998:296) notes that: ‘The basic theory seems to have evolved sometime in the 1st-2nd century A.D., the period when the doctrine of *avatāras* was also in a formative stage’, and he suggests a potential influence from Zoroastrian emanation theories—for: ‘It may have developed in Kashmir, where it is held that the earliest texts of the *Pāñcarātra* were later written’ and ‘the term *Harimedhas* occurs five times in the *Nārāyaṇīya* to designate *Nārāyaṇa*..., this has plausibly been seen as a Sanskritization of the Avestan *Ahura Mazdāh*’.

Whatever the nature of origins, it early became entangled with aspects of the epic avatar traditions. Kumarappa (1933:99) describes the basic outline of this idea in the *Nārāyaṇīya*:

the Supreme Being exists as *Vāsudeva*, and in creating the Universe enters into union with earth, wind, space, water, and light, the five primal elements, and in combination with these appears as *Jīva* (embodied soul) and is called *Śeṣha* or *Samkarshaṇa*. By *Samkarshaṇa*’s spontaneous act, there evolves from him *Pradyumna*, who is the mind of all creatures and into whom all creatures merge at a dissolution.

From Him again arises *Aniruddha*, who is consciousness. He is the creator....

The latter three names here, as Matchett (2001:7) notes, are those of *Kṛṣṇa*’s half-

⁷ NB There is no scholarly (or indeed traditional) consensus on the meaning of the name *Pāñcarātra* (see: Gonda (1977), pp.43-47; Brockington (1998), p.300, and p.225,n.43 below), but there is certainly some close connection of this group with the figure of *Nārāyaṇa*—who, as Brockington (1998:295) notes, ‘is considered the promulgator and preceptor of the *Pāñcarātra* system’.

brother, son and grandson respectively (i.e. of epic avatar-heroes)⁸. Śeṣa ('snake'), refers to Saṃkarṣaṇa's supposed identity as an avatar of the primordial serpent upon which Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa is traditionally believed to lie on the diluvial waters⁹; and since, in the epics, Vāsudeva/Kṛṣṇa incarnates this latter (and supreme) deity, their relative positions in this scheme are appropriate.

Kumarappa (1933:99,n2) cites a suggestion that the above-mentioned grouping of "emanations" (*vyūha*) is a product of an attempt to homologize early 'non-Brahmanic'¹⁰ Pāñcarātra worship of Kṛṣṇa and his brother with 'the famous saying of the Puruṣa Sūkta (fourth stanza) about the four quarters of God', so that 'two more members of the family of Kṛṣṇa were deified'¹¹. This, then, is a connection (indeed, in this later, post-upaniṣadic, context an identification) through resemblance, and it illustrates well Smith's suggested purpose for these as "strategies for orthodoxy". In this case, the strategy was evidently successful, for the *vyūhas* were explicitly adopted by later brāhmaṇical traditions such as the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* and in later Vaiṣṇava theology are formed into a concept of three '*puruṣa avatāras*', "spiritual avatars", equivalents of the lower three *vyūhas*¹². I will have something to say of these at a later stage (see Section 4.1 below). These are examples of "identification" through resemblance or association, rather than of "connection" in the vedic sense outlined by Smith, and, as I indicated towards the end of the previous section, such identifications are a necessary part of the development of the avatar traditions. But other processes, and other figures are also involved.

Parrinder (1970:17) writes that in the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (3:12ff.):

God is identified with other deities, but especially he is called Rudra, who is 'kindly' (*śiva*). He is the adorable God who creates and rules all, standing opposite creatures, yet he is called upon to appear to men in his kindly form (*tanu*). ...the seer seeking liberation goes to God for 'refuge' (*śarana*)... And... the key word of 'devotion' (*bhakti*) appears ...shared between God and the spiritual teacher (*guru*).

⁸ On the name Aniruddha, see Gonda (1969). This is *Mahābhārata* 12.326.31-39.

⁹ NB Kosambi (2002:388,n1) notes of a description of Nārāyaṇa as a child lying on the diluvial waters that: 'Psychoanalysts would call the whole scene symbolic of birth, the waters being uterine'. He suggests that the banyan tree, under which Nārāyaṇa is depicted, is representative of the placenta, and, whilst not wanting to put too much stock in such speculative interpretations, I might suggest that the same can be said of the many-headed serpent—its tail being the umbilical cord.

¹⁰ On the extra-vedic character of the Pāñcarātra see M. Narasimhachary (1969), pp.xxv-xxvi. See also Gonda (1977:48-50)—(later) Pāñcarātra clearly viewed itself as representing vedic orthodoxy.

¹¹ See also Gonda (1977), p.111.

¹² See *Caitanya-Caritāmṛta* 2:20.244,250;21.38. This concept occurs in developed form in the *Sātvata-Tantra*, but also receives a passing mention in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (e.g. 10:1.21)—see Prabhupāda (1974), pt.2, vol.1, p.437.

The Sanskrit adjective ‘śiva’ soon came to be identified with the deity to which it here refers¹³, and the description of devotion as shared between God and *guru* hints at the complete mergence of these two figures that is found in many traditions¹⁴ and which has certainly influenced the cult of Sathya Sai Baba (see p.51). But, in later traditions, the figure of Śiva is sometimes connected to the family of Rudra, either as one of his sons (as a member of a species of gods known as ‘the Rudras’, usually said to be eleven in number), or as his father¹⁵.

I will refer to the traditional processes involved in these latter transformations as “distinction” (in this case of Śiva from Rudra), “enumeration” (here of ‘the Rudras’), and “categorization” (as Rudra’s “son” or “father”). These processes are especially prominent in a philosophical tradition known as “Sāṃkhya” (“distinction” or “enumeration”¹⁶), founded by a sage by the name of Kapila (c. 5th century BCE). As Zaehner (1969:140) observes, Sāṃkhya posits a fundamental distinction between ‘spirit’ (*puruṣa*, conceptualised as male), and ‘material nature’ [or “creation”¹⁷] (*prakṛti*, portrayed as feminine), and distinguishes twenty-three “principles” or evolutes (*tattvas*) of the latter, further enumerating and categorizing these under various headings:

The first evolute is *buddhi*, ‘intellect’ or ‘consciousness’.... From this arises *ahaṃkāra*, the ego, the apparent centre of personality; and from the ego derive the mind (*manas*)... the five senses, the five ‘motor’ organs (speech, handling, walking, evacuation, and reproduction), the five ‘subtle’ elements, that is, the objects of the five senses, and the five ‘gross’ elements—space or ether, air, fire, water, and earth.

In all, then, there are twenty-five categories including spirit.

These, as we will see, have important echoes in the avatar traditions. Even more significant, as Zaehner goes on to say, are ‘three ‘constituents’, the so-called *guṇas* or ‘strands’—which Sāṃkhya posits as being ‘fundamental to the structure of material Nature’: goodness (*sattva*), passion (*rajas*), and darkness (*tamas*)¹⁸.

¹³ On this see: Daniélou (1963:197); Dandekar (1976:67, 73, 110-111) & (1979:12). Dandekar suggests the influence of ‘folk-philology’ here, ‘For, the word *śiva* was phonetically similar to the name of the proto-Dravidian god (who was the direct ancestor of Vedic Rudra)’. Cf. Gonda (1977), p.153.

¹⁴ Gonda (1965:235) notes that: ‘Whereas the term *guru*- in the sense of “teacher” does not appear before ChU. 8, 15, 1, *ācārya*- – literally “the man who knows, adheres to and (or) practises the traditional good behaviour, customs, practices, established rules or institutions etc.” – is already found in the Atharvaveda [in which] ...there can be no doubt whatsoever that the *ācārya*- is in the milieu of the poet already an important and mighty personage... identified with Varuṇa and other divinities’.

¹⁵ See, e.g., CDHMR 296ff.

¹⁶ Brockington (1998:303) notes a passage in the *Mahābhārata* which ‘affirms that the basis of Sāṃkhya is discrimination and enumeration’. Cf. MW.

¹⁷ Translating *prakṛti* as ‘creation’ nicely captures its dual sense as both the basis for, and final product of a cosmogonic process, and also (via its French origins) something of its feminine sense.

¹⁸ The *guṇas* occur earlier, in the *Atharva Veda* [Zaehner (1969:15)] and in some of the Upaniṣads,

We have already seen Sathya Sai Baba make several references to the *guṇas*, and may note here the similarity of the twenty-five *tattvas* to the “sixteen marks” of the avatar noted earlier (more on this shortly). Additionally, and more dramatically, we may note here a claim by anti-Sai activists that Sathya Sai Baba somehow employs the distinction between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* as a justification for some of his homosexual “abuses”. Robert Priddy, for example, writes of one of the (sexually abused) students in Sathya Sai Baba’s schools:

...Swami told him that he (Swami) was the only purusha in the world and the whole world was his wife.

And he connects this with:

the well-known and (strangely oft-cited) statement SSB [Sathya Sai Baba] made in a discourse that he is the only male in the world, for all the rest are female before him. It was then taken to be symbolical (i.e. Purusha vs. Prakriti), but - in the light of the increasing exposé of his allegedly voracious homosexual appetites - it instead now sounds almost diabolically commonplace.¹⁹

Sathya Sai Baba is thus (and in other instances also) presented as “perverting” or “corrupting” otherwise sound traditional philosophies. But, if there is any truth in the scenario suggested above, there is little novelty. Eliade (1958:255-257) cites some upaniṣadic passages in which ‘sexuality was valorized as ritual... the sexual plane is sanctified and homologized to the planes of ritual and myth... transposed and valorized as liturgical chant’. Of course, this was evidently consensual sexual practice, and as Eliade (1958:258) notes, traditionally, such ‘sexual union was felt to be a “conjunction of opposites”’—homosexuality as a spiritual practice is virtually unheard of in ancient Hindu traditions²⁰—but this perhaps accords with the (presumed) need of Sathya Sai Baba to justify his actions in the manner described above. Sathya Sai Baba is portrayed as homologizing a traditionally sanctioned philosophical theory of a gender difference between deity and creation to his proposed sexual relationship with his devotee—and this, presumably, through the resemblance of the shared focus of these two on gender issues between deity and non-deity (with additional unspoken premises attesting to his identity as a deity and the greater propriety of heterosexual as opposed to homosexual interactions). Thereby, allegedly, he seeks to provide legitimation (i.e. traditional authority) for

but this is the earliest systematic formulation of them [Kumarappa (1933), p.30, n.1].

¹⁹ <http://home.no.net/anir/Sai/enigma/SaiSex.htm> [9-5-2006]

²⁰ Ruth Vanita (ed.) (2002); Vanita & Saleem Kidwai (eds.) (2000). Vanita & Kidwai (2000:360) note that Tantra ‘emphasizes a structured heterosexual intercourse as a means of liberation’, and Urban (2003a:222) writes that ‘homosexual intercourse... [is] almost never found in Tantric rituals’.

his proposed actions. And, from what we have just seen (leaving aside questions of sexual-norms or morality), he does this in a thoroughly traditional manner.

The Upaniṣads provide some further significant examples of interiorization and of some of the other traditional processes outlined above. Indeed, some of the later Upaniṣads were likely directly influenced by Yoga and Sāṃkhya ideas. Thus, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3:9.4 interiorizes the eleven Rudras (who I mentioned above as being storm deities in mythological traditions) construing them as the ‘ten vital breaths (*prāṇa*) with the heart (*manas*) as eleventh’²¹, these being some of the Sāṃkhya categories just described. And, some of Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings can be seen in continuity to this type of thinking. For example, he interiorizes the figure of Indra in this connection:

Indhra is not conceived [of] as a distinct person residing in Heaven. He is the monarch of the senses of man; He is the God in charge of the mind which operates the senses, and can also control the senses. Indhra’s controller aspect is known as Rudhra. Indhra is delineated as [being] armed with a wheel, with ten spokes---the ten being the five senses of perception and the five of action²². The Rudhras are eleven, for in their case, the mind is added as the eleventh²³.

Sathya Sai Baba makes no mention of his source here, but the parallels with *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* are clear²⁴ (especially in the light of n.22 & 24 below).

Similarly, *Praśna Upaniṣad* 6 enumerates the sacrificial parts (*kalās*) of the (vedic) Puruṣa as being ‘sixteen’, this being another interiorization of some of the Sāṃkhya *tattvas* (as the details of the sixteen parts show, see below), and it is said: ‘that person [Puruṣa] is here within the body, he in whom these sixteen parts arise’²⁵—yet another interiorization. This passage is significant in that it is an early antecedent of the “sixteen marks” of the avatar that we saw Sathya Sai Baba mention earlier. To cite this again here, Taylor (1987a:122) gives Sathya Sai Baba’s list of the sixteen ‘marks’ as:

control over the five elements (earth, air, fire, water, and space); control over the five motor organs of the body; and control over the five sensory organs of the body... the triple powers of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence.

²¹ CDHMR 269

²² Cf. the translation of *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* 3:9.4 at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe15/sbe15072.htm> [1-5-2007] (p.141), which glosses the Rudras as: ‘These ten vital breaths (*prāṇas*, the senses, i.e. the five *gñānendriyas*, and the five *karmendriyas*), and *Ātman*, as the eleventh’.

²³ Sathya Sai Baba (1-10-1979) S14 38:237

²⁴ Sathya Sai Baba is evidently aware of the above-quoted upaniṣadic parallel, for, whilst this is absent from his written retelling of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* [UV 32ff.], he gives a version of this passage in one of his speeches (albeit unacknowledged) [Sathya Sai Baba (7-10-1989) S22 33:237].

²⁵ *Praśna Upaniṣad* (<http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe15/sbe15111.htm> [1-5-2007], p.283)

Brockington (1998:291) notes of the idea of *kalās* that: ‘Its philosophical basis is obviously that of the eight *prakṛtis* and deity/*puruṣa*’—i.e. a Sāṃkhya theory—and indeed the eight *prakṛtis* prove to be a subset of the twenty-five *tattvas*. Furthermore, Anima Sen Gupta (1987:322-323) describes the theory of the eight *prakṛtis* as follows (summarizing a traditional commentary on a Sāṃkhya work):

The unmanifest, intellect, egoity, and the five subtle elements constitute the eight generative principles (*prakṛti*). ...The old verse, “He who knows the twenty-five principles...is released...,” is quoted. ...The sixteen generated products are the five sense capacities, the five action capacities, mind and the five gross elements.

Fifteen of the members of Sathya Sai Baba’s above list are given here, and can thus be partly understood as products of the general (Sāṃkhya) tendency of enumeration (applied, as is the case with the 25 *tattvas* above, in the context of an emanation cosmogony). As we will see, however, Sathya Sai Baba presents several variations on the *kalā* theory that cannot so easily be tied to traditional precedents.

On one occasion, when specifically asked about the 16 *kalās* as applied to the avatar²⁶, Sathya Sai Baba lists them as:

sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste ...mind, heart, intelligence, turyavastha or transcendence of intuitive experience²⁷ ...grace, Anugrah or special grace, the power to create a new order of life in society, new states of consciousness in individuals or new objects, the power to support and sustain what is inherently good, which may happen to be defenceless, the power to destroy what is evil.²⁸

The first few *kalās* here are members of the twenty-five *tattvas* cited earlier, but I could find no precise traditional parallel for this list (although I did come across one near variation upon it in a contemporary (non-Sai) Hindu context²⁹). It does, however, bear certain similarities to another of his versions of this list which does more clearly draw upon traditional ideas. This is again given by Sathya Sai Baba in response to a specific question about the sixteen *kalās* of the avatar (albeit that he seems to conflate ‘*kalā*’ with ‘*kāla*’, ‘time’):

²⁶ <http://mypage.direct.ca/s/sairam/march99.doc> [14-8-2003].

²⁷ The reference here is presumably to the upaniṣadic idea that—as Dandekar (1979:51) writes: ‘One cannot... realise the true nature of the essential self in any of the three states of consciousness, namely, wakefulness (*jāgrat*), dream (*svapna*), and deep-sleep (*saṣupti* [sic]). It is in a state which transcends these three, that is to say the fourth state (*turīyavasthā*), when body and senses, mind, intellect, and ego cease to function... that the nature of the essential self as pure self-consciousness becomes realisable through self-intuition’.

²⁸ V.K. Gokak (quoted by Swami Sai Sharan Anand, *Sai-Baba: The Light from Above* (Abhinav Publications) http://www.indiangyan.com/books/otherbooks/sai_baba/Index.shtml [13-4-2007])

²⁹ See http://webonautics.com/mythology/avataar_kalki2.html [26-11-2006]—declared by the author of this site (when questioned by me) to be based on ‘notes taken by me when I had attended one of the Pravachanas (a religious gathering where a guru narrates a particular purana)’.

Time is three-faceted (*trikaal*) and can be divided into past present and future. The Supreme Godhead is immanent in each ‘*kaal*’ or time period. Five *Shaktis* are present in the Godhead in each of the three time periods. These *Shaktis* are—1) *Srushti* or Creation 2) *Sthiti* or Preservation 3) *Laya* or Dissolution 4) *Tilodayak* [*sic*] or the ability to incarnate 5) *Anugraha* or the ability to shower special Grace. The sixteenth attribute is the *Chith* or the state of Being - *Aham Brahmasi* [*sic*] (I am That or I am Brahman) [TSI 25].

This is likely an echo of a (tantric) tradition ascribing ‘five functions’ (*pañcakṛtya*) to the divine—indeed, Sathya Sai Baba elsewhere uses a term similar to this (in form) in connection with the *kalās* (see below). These functions, as Rohan Dunuwila (1985:102,128), notes, are: *sṛṣṭi* (creation), *sthiti* (preservation), *pralaya* (destruction), *tirodhāna* (concealment) and *anugraha* (grace). We will see in Section 4.2 below something of the significance of the first three of these in Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar persona, and the fourth action, *tirodhāna*, is defined in some tantric traditions as ‘the providing of experience to souls in accordance with their past merits and demerits’, thus showing similarities to a meaning given by Sathya Sai Baba in yet another of his variants of the list of *kalās*: ‘Taking into account all the previous existences or *Tirodhayak*’³⁰.

Again, this last statement was elicited in response to a question directly put to Sathya Sai Baba about the *kalās* of the avatar—evidently this has been a topic of some interest amongst the more intellectually inclined of his devotees—and this suggests to me that, rather than primarily drawing upon traditional authority, he is here creating a sort of “rational-legal authority” (in Weber’s terms) for his use of avatar ideas. He wishes to assure those of his devotees to whom it may be important that such ideas have some sort of “technical” basis—I will have more to say about this later (see p.229 below). He sometimes also seems to use the concept of *kalās* as an *arthavāda*—pointing to the unity of human and divine. He says:

In relation to the human being, the process of *panchikrita* makes man a mixture of the five elements and produces diversity in qualities. These have been described in spiritual parlance as *shodasa kalas* (the sixteen aspects). What are these sixteen aspects? They are the five *jnanendriyas* (organs of perception), the five *karmendriyas* (organs of action), the five elements, and the mind. Every individual has these sixteen constituents, although the sixteen *kalas* are attributed only to the Divine. Man has to realise his divinity [(29-5-1990) S23 19:19off.]

This returns us to the Sāṃkhya traditions noted above, which we saw Brockington to suggest to be the “basis” of the *kalā* theories, but another use to which Sathya Sai Baba puts this tradition seems to draw and to even earlier traditions.

³⁰ VD 13

Gonda (1965:121) traces the idea of sixteen parts of divinity back to a description of Prajāpati in the *Yajur Veda*, and concludes that ‘the number 16 is associated with the idea of totality’ [thus resembling what we saw earlier (p.153) of Prajāpati in this respect]—often being the basis of traditional Indian monetary systems³¹. Significantly, Gonda also notes that:

The doctrine [‘of the sixteenfold Prajāpati’] seems to have developed from the theory of the fourfold Puruṣa in ṚV. 10, 90.... this theory has also led to the doctrine of the sixteenfold body-cum-vital air of ŚB. [*Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa*] 10,4,1,17... i.e. to that of sixteen-partite man (11,1,6,36...): *ṣoḍaśakalaḥ puruṣaḥ*.

From the *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa*, and/or perhaps other similar traditions, this idea finds its way into *Praśna Upaniṣad* 6—which, as Paul Deussen (1897:602) notes, was evidently ‘composed out of the reminiscences of other passages’—and into Sāṃkhya and many later mythological, medical, astronomical, yogic, tantric and theological texts, this fact no doubt contributing to the bewildering variety of versions and interpretations that we have already encountered. Indeed, Sathya Sai Baba adopts in this last regard a typical “charismatic” ploy—criticizing the existence of the many variant traditional interpretations of this theory as being confusing and misleading, and (albeit ironically), in supposedly setting the record straight, promotes yet another variant reading of tradition³². But it is the *impression* of rectifying earlier folly that generates charismatic authority, rather than that such “folly” is actually (consistently) “rectified”.

Sathya Sai Baba’s reading of the *Praśna Upaniṣad* (explicitly citing this work)³³ is certainly innovative. He lists the 16 *kalās* as follows:

There is *Akasa* (space or ether). From the *sabda* (vibrations) in space, *Vayu* (air) is produced. From air, *Tejas* (fire) emerges. From *Tejas* water is produced. The solidified form of water is the *Prithvi* (earth). These are the *Panchabhutas* (five basic elements). There are the *Panchapranas* (five vital breaths): *Prana*, *Apaana*, *Samaana*, *Udaana* and *Vyaana*. The five elements and the five vital breaths together make ten. The five *Jnanendriyas* (organs of perception) are the eyes, the ears, the nose, the mouth and the skin (seeing, hearing, smelling, speaking and touching are the faculties of these organs). With these five, the total goes up to fifteen. There is the mind. With it, we have the sixteen *kalas* [(29-5-1991) S24 15:161–162].

Of these, only the ‘five basic elements’ and mind are found in the “original” *Praśna Upaniṣad* (6:4). Moreover, whilst the *Praśna Upaniṣad* refers only to the

³¹ NB Gonda (1965:115ff.) dedicates a whole chapter to the role of the number 16 in Indian traditions, but finds the evidence inconclusive as to its origins, although he favours base-16 monetary systems over another plausible origination for the 16 *kalās*—the 16 *kalās* (phases) of the moon.

³² Sathya Sai Baba (29-5-1991) S24 15:161

³³ Sathya Sai Baba (28-5-1991) S24 14:157

Puruṣa with no mention or even implication of any avatar theories (it considerably predates these), Sathya Sai Baba goes on to connect the 16 *kalās* to the avatar.

Perhaps significantly, Sathya Sai Baba's list here recalls some lists given in various traditional commentaries on *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 1:3.1 and 2:4.23, which, in addition to the five elements and mind, cover the *jñānendriyas* individually (substituting, however, the *karmendriyas* [organs of action] for the *pañcaprāṇas*)³⁴. As we have already seen, and will further see, Sathya Sai Baba's avatar ideas are often in keeping with those presented in the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* and the commentaries thereupon—indeed, as mentioned earlier, Sathya Sai Baba has written a “retelling” of this work. But the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* itself makes only passing mention of the *kalās* (mention which is in effect, and sometimes literally, merely invocatory), and it does not connect them to its other occasional uses of the term ‘*kalā*’ (see Section 4.2 below)—as a part of the divine which descends as an avatar³⁵.

The “original”, as expressed in *Praśna Upaniṣad* 6:5 is a monistic reinterpretation of the vedic and brāhmaṇic Puruṣa story, for all the *kalās* merge in the immortal partless cosmic Puruṣa as ‘flowing rivers tending towards the ocean, on reaching the ocean, disappear, their name-shape broken up’³⁶. And Sathya Sai Baba elsewhere shows that he is aware of these details—indeed, he has written a brief “retelling” of this work also³⁷. But, in the passage we are discussing here, Sathya Sai Baba implies that, rather than merely applying to the cosmic “person”, the *kalās* are found in all persons³⁸, but especially the avatars—who are said to ‘enjoy these *kalas* in all their fullness and purity’³⁹. He thus again, in addition to imbuing the avatar with rational authority, uses this as *arthavāda*, pointing beyond dualistic conceptions of an ultimate distinction between human and divine. *Praśna Upaniṣad* 6:2 does hold that the Puruṣa is immanent in all people, but it does not specifically mention the *kalās* in this regard, and, of course, does not mention the avatars. As is his wont, Sathya Sai Baba also adds an ethical dimension (absent from the original) to his retelling of this tradition, elaborating upon his own application of it to the avatars to present the view that in contrast to ordinary people

³⁴ See Tagare (trans.) *The Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* (Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1976-), Part I, p.22;174.

³⁵ See, e.g., *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1:3.27—cf. Sathya Sai Baba's usage at the head of this section.

³⁶ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1953), p.667.

³⁷ In this “retelling”, composed some years prior to the speech cited above, Sathya Sai Baba writes: ‘All rivers join the sea and lose therein their Names and Forms. The rivers are thereafter called “the sea”. So too, only the Purusha remains. ...He is imperishable, endless’ (UV 45).

³⁸ Sathya Sai Baba (29-5-1991) S24 15:161

³⁹ Sathya Sai Baba (29-5-1991) S24 15:162

the avatars use the *kalās* selflessly, for the benefit of others⁴⁰—the implication being that, if only his devotees would do likewise, they might attain avatar status.

Interestingly, in Sathya Sai Baba's persona, there is another notable sense in which the *Puruṣa* is interiorized—indeed quite literally so. I noted in Chapter 1 (p.44) Sathya Sai Baba's regular "regurgitations" of ovoid *liṅgams* that are believed to magically form inside his body, and Dandekar (1976:84) cites a (traditional) view relayed by modern Indian scholars that 'the Śiva-*liṅga* is the closest possible approximation to the cosmic *Puruṣa*—the hemispherical top of the *liṅga* consists of thousands of heads (*sahasrasīrṣa* [sic]), each the size of a point'. Whilst Dandekar (1979:290-296) himself gives more prominence to the long history of 'undeniable' phallic associations of the *liṅgam*, this abstract symbolism has a place. Bowen (1985:233-234) outlines the traditional phallic and abstract associations of the *liṅgam*, and considers Sathya Sai Baba's views, concluding:

Baba recognises that however one may focus on the abstract symbolism of the *liṅga*, the other element in its history and morphology is so evident that an exclusive interpretation is impossible to maintain.

But his evidence for this assertion does not seem to bear this out:

Baba... is reported to have said of an ellipsoid *liṅga* in 1974 that it had 'the dimensions of *daṣaṅgula* (ten inches)'... Baba's comment in that instant draws on the tradition reflected in the *Puruṣa Sukta* where the phallus is spoken of as divinity 'projecting (from the body) by the breadth of ten fingers'.

As Friedrich Max Müller (1884:247,n2) notes, traditional interpretations (given by Śaṅkara) of the verse in question here explain 'ten fingers' breadth by endless; or, ...the heart, which is ten fingers above the navel', and the sense of the original verse, *Ṛg-Veda* 10:90.1, seems closer to the first of these interpretations—the *Puruṣa*, it is said, "covers the whole world and still extends beyond it by ten inches" (*sa bhūmiṃ viśvato vṛtvātyatiṣṭhād daśāṅgulam*). It is the great size of the *Puruṣa* that is emphasized here, rather than any particular anatomical feature.

It is possible, but not necessarily the case, that, as Bowen goes on to suggest, later (tantric) traditions describing figures other than the *Puruṣa* took up the measurement here in reference to the male anatomy. But Sathya Sai Baba's own statement on this, to which Bowen refers, does invoke the *Puruṣa*, and is clearly lacking in any conscious awareness of phallic symbolism—he describes the (ovoid) *liṅgam* in question as "ten inches in circumference":

People gather in many a sacred place for Sivarathri, but, you were able to be here

⁴⁰ Sathya Sai Baba (29-5-1991) S24 15:165–166

on this thrice-holy day and witness the emergence of the Dasangula Swarupa (the Upanishads declare that God is adyathisthath dasangulam) the ten-inch-symbol of the Kala (Time) Desa (Space) Manifestation of Divinity, as described by Sage Kapila.... Having had the unique good fortune of witnessing the Emergence of the Time-Space-Embodiment in the Linga-Form, I assure you that you are released from the bondage of birth and death. ...The Linga, as you can see, is dasangulam, ten inches in circumference. It has within it, shining with native light the TRISUL of Siva, symbolising the three phases of Time—past, Present and Future—and the three dimensions of Space—Earth, Sky and the Nether Regions. ...The Sruthis declare the Purusha as Splendour, as Jyothi. You have seen the Splendour when the Linga emerged; you have seen the triple Jyothi in the Linga Itself. No greater fortune can befall a man [(21-2-1974) SSS9 47-49].

This does, however provide us with a few more good examples of interiorization and a few of the other traditional processes that we have encountered. The three-pronged *triśūla* (trident) of Śiva (cf. Fig.16b) is hierarchically connected through resemblance to the three traditional dimensions of time and space; the shininess of the *liṅgam*⁴¹ is equated with the splendour of the Puruṣa; and the whole lot is interiorized—within the *liṅgam* and within Sathya Sai Baba—granting the boon of immortality to passive observers, simply through their “great fortune”⁴² in witnessing the emergence of the former from the latter (rather than through the acts of knowledge or sacrifice that we saw earlier to be associated with the Puruṣa). Hence, as we have often seen to be the case, even this seemingly idiosyncratic proclamation is a product of thoroughly traditional processes; Sathya Sai Baba is “innovating” in traditional ways.

Traditional propensities for distinction, enumeration and categorization similarly play a major role in the above-mentioned Pāñcarātra avatar theories; indeed, Smith (1969:xxvii) notes a tradition that ‘this system came to be known as ‘*pañcarātra*’ since it deals with the five-fold manifestation of Lord Vāsudeva, viz., *para*, *vyūha*, *vibhava*, *antaryāmin* and *arcā*’⁴³. The Sanskrit terms here refer to

⁴¹ NB The *liṅgams* produced by Sathya Sai Baba are usually golden, but sometimes (seem to) glow with different colours—see, e.g., VD 54-55.

⁴² NB Sathya Sai Baba elsewhere qualifies this by saying, for example, in the case of one early instance of his producing a *liṅgam* from his mouth: ‘You witnessed this wonderful event due to accumulated merits of your past lives and not because of this present life. You were *yōgabhraṣṭas* [persons fallen from yogic states] in your previous lives’ (SSSA 61).

⁴³ NB This is a folk-etymology (through resemblance), and is but one of a number of similar folk-etymologies for this name—as Brockington (1998:300) notes, the Pāñcarātra sect seems to have distinguished various pentads, and consciously connected itself with them—presumably thereby strengthening its sense of identity and, conversely, providing “canonical” status for these categories themselves. Cf. HDH 156. On the meaning of ‘Pāñcarātra’, see Dandekar (1976:52) and p.162,n.7 above. For more on these five types of *avatāras* see Srinivas Chari (1994), pp.212-228.

what Kumarappa (1933:113,n1) translates as: ‘Supreme form’, ‘emanation’, ‘incarnation’, ‘Inner Ruler’ and ‘incarnation in idols’ respectively. Especially the second and third of these categories are significant to the overall development of the avatar concept—Soifer (1976:131) writes:

Although the vibhavas are said to correspond to the avatāras... and indeed we find among the list of thirty-nine vibhavas nine of the ten classical avatāras, the conceptual basis of the Purāṇic avatāra seems to stem in large part from the vyūha manifestation. ...Each vyūha has both a creative-preservative and ethical activity. Saṃkarṣaṇa effects the evolution of the universe and teaches the true monotheistic (ekānta) religion; through Pradyumna the duality of Puruṣa and prakṛti appears, and he must translate the ekānta religion into practice; Aniruddha is responsible for the creation of souls, the maintenance and government of the world, and teaches the way to liberation resulting from the practice of the religion.

This dual creative-preservative/ethical activity (including, I would add, a significant political component) perhaps prefigures the later avatar accounts.

Whilst Soifer (1976:133) goes on to suggest that, eventually, ‘the vyūha doctrine receded into the background, eclipsed by the less philosophical notions of vibhava and avatāra’⁴⁴, this is not the whole story, for echoes of this doctrine find their way into Sathya Sai Baba’s ideas—retaining, moreover, strong associations with the avatars. Thus, for example, Sathya Sai Baba proclaims that:

The four *yugas* (aeons)—*Krita*, *Treta*, *Dwapara* and *Kali*—are permeated with Divinity. Hence, God has also the name *Chaturatmaka* (the Fourfold Spirit)⁴⁵. This fourfold Spirit is manifested in four forms with distinctive attributes though their powers are one and the same. They are: *Vasudeva*, *Sankarshana*, *Aniruddha* and *Pradyumna*. All the four are combined in the *Avatara* (the incarnation of the Divine in human form) [(7-4-1989) S22 8:56].

Homologizing the four (*catur*) *vyūhas* to the four *yugas* (i.e. *caturyuga*) through their mutual resemblance in being four-fold, Sathya Sai Baba includes all of these in the avatar (sc. himself)—perhaps through the resemblance of their unitary nature (‘permeated with Divinity’; ‘one and the same’) with the unitary nature of *the* avatar). In the Pāñcarātra [and purāṇic] versions, as Kumarappa (1979:114) notes, the (non-*vyūha*) avatars emanate from the *vyūhas*, either from Aniruddha, ‘or only some from Aniruddha and the rest from the other three *Vyūhas*’; hence this is inclusivism on Sathya Sai Baba’s part—the *vyūhas* are not completely “alien” to the avatar traditions, but in asserting that they are “combined in the Avatar” Sathya

⁴⁴ On the history of the *vyūhas*, see: Dandekar (1979), pp.226-228; Sheridan (1986), p.63-65.

⁴⁵ NB Sathya Sai Baba’s reference here is presumably to some purāṇic epithet—e.g., Dandekar (1979:226,n86) notes that the *Mārkaṇḍeya-Purāṇa* ‘describes the supreme god as *caturvyūhātman*’.

Sai Baba claims them for his own avatar-theology.

And he goes on to invoke the *vyūhas* in a way that exemplifies, in addition to connection through resemblance and inclusivism, what we have seen to be his fondness for interiorization and spiritualization of tradition—and in particular his penchant for denying any duality between the human and divine:

God is not different from man. *Vasudeva* is *Paramatma* (the Omni-Self). *Sankarshana* is *Jivatma* (the individual Soul). *Pradyumna* is the mind. *Aniruddha* is *Aham* (the ego). The union of these four is *Manavatva* (humanness)... *Aham* means “I.”
...This *Aham* is the essence of everything [(7-4-1989) S22 8:57].

Traditionally also, the *vyūhas* are sometimes interiorized—as Daniel Sheridan (1986:64) notes, the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* ‘correlates the cosmic intelligence (*citta*) with the presiding manifestation *Vāsudeva*. The threefold ego (*ahaṃkāra*) is connected with *Samkarṣaṇa* and mind (*manas*) is joined to *Aniruddha*’. But Sathya Sai Baba’s interpretation here adds an explicit “spiritualization” along the non-dualistic lines that are familiar to us. Rather than (merely) drawing authority from traditional ideas, or asserting their validity, he explicates them along traditional *advaita* lines—using this as an *arthavāda*, pointing to the Self.

Despite this, Sathya Sai Baba does attribute some practical, devotional, reality to the *vyūhas*, saying of the latter of these, for example:

Aniruddha, ...refers to one who has a unique quality. He confers this quality-*Sampada* (wealth) on whoever prays to Him. He is the Lord who confers both material and spiritual benefits on those who adore Him [(7-4-1989) S22 8:57].

And the reference to ‘*Sampada* (wealth)’ here is significant, for traditional accounts of the *vyūhas* attribute certain distinct “qualities” to each *vyūha*—‘wealth’ being one of the qualities listed in some variants of this list. These “qualities” seem to originate with what Bradley Malkovsky (1997:544) cites as being a ‘characteristically *Pāñcarātra*’ theory that enumerates six *guṇas* (attributes) of divinity. Kumarappa (1933:100) gives a description of the six *guṇas* from the *Pāñcarātra Saṃhitā*s as follows: ‘*jñāna* (knowledge), *aiśvarya* (lordship), *śakti* (ability), *bala* (strength), *vīrya* (virility), and *tejas* (splendour)’. He notes that these are assigned as a group to *Vāsudeva*, and in pairs to the other three *vyūhas* in rough accordance with the respective functions of these emanations (as outlined earlier, p.163)—the significance of this will become clear later. Srinivasa Chari (1994:188-190) outlines some of the traditional connotations of the terms in this list, and I will have something to say of these in relation to Sathya Sai Baba’s adoption of them in the next chapter (Section 4.2); for now I will simply take them at face value.

Interestingly, and in line with the concept of *arthavāda*, Suthren Hirst (2005: 133) describes Śaṅkara's interpretation of the six *guṇas* in a manner that is reminiscent of what we have just concluded of Sathya Sai Baba's interpretation of the *vyūhas* (i.e. as being “combined in the Avatar” and pointing to the Self)⁴⁶:

Each may be seen as an aspect of either omniscience (knowledge) or omnipotence (sovereignty, potentiality, strength, might and splendour). They lead beyond the world, beyond the idea of Lord as omnipotent unmoved mover, to the Inner Controller [*antaryāmin*].

For Śaṅkara, these point ‘beyond the world’ and beyond a concept of the deity as external to the *antaryāmin* (which, as Gonda (1961:137) notes, the Upaniṣads describe as ‘All-knowing (*Sarvajña*) and the Source (*Yoni*) of all’, hence the connection to omniscience and omnipotence here). As Suthren Hirst (2005:129) puts it:

the pupil is led to the Lord who is the Inner Controller.... Only the conceptualisation of the Inner Controller... transcends this constructed world, pointing beyond itself to the unnamed witness, free from all conceptualisation whatever.

According to Suthren Hirst (2005:136), Śaṅkara thus takes account of:

the context in which the Advaitin teaching must be given: the context of this world and its structures, the context of popular understandings of the Supreme Lord.... while these are finally to be discarded as superimpositions upon non-dual reality they are not unimportant to Śaṅkara in pedagogical terms, since they help to draw the pupil towards the non-dual truth... the movement is from current context and misunderstanding towards ever more proximate apprehensions of the self.

This is an important point, and goes some way towards explaining why Sathya Sai Baba should refer at all to such traditions if he does not believe these to be ontological verities (and, if it is not already so, it will become clear as we progress from the sheer inconsistency of his usages of these that he does not generally believe them to be such). There is a sense in which he must use “the context of popular understandings” of the avatars to make his point. We will see more of this context in the next section, as I progress to consider the Indian epic literature.

⁴⁶ NB Śaṅkara does not present a similar understanding of the *vyūha* theory—indeed he rejects this as a cosmogony—but, more generally speaking, as Malkovsky (1997:544) notes, ‘Śaṅkara had quite a favourable view of *pāñcarātra*, although he was certainly himself not a *Pāñcarātrin*’. I will have more to say about Śaṅkara, and about the *Pāñcarātra* at various stages below (Sections 4.2 & 4.3).

3.4 Epic Epiphanies

Valmiki composed the great epic *Ramayana* exactly as the events took place without any imagination or fabrication of events. The great sages and seers in those days spoke nothing but the truth.¹

Modern (at least modern Western) scholarship generally lends little credence to claims that stories of the traditional avatars are historically accurate depictions of real figures, and, interestingly—given that Sathya Sai Baba’s purpose in the above is to encourage strict adherence to truthfulness in his devotees (he goes on to say ‘Truth is God; speak Truth’)—he himself sometimes makes statements that contradict his assertions in this regard. Thus, for example, he interprets the “ten heads” of Rāvaṇa (the demonic villain of the *Rāmāyaṇa*) as a metaphor (via resemblance) for the major branches of traditional lore (often enumerated to be ten):

If really he had ten heads how would he be able to lie in his bed or move about? This is not the inner meaning of this description. He is said to be ten-headed because he was the master of the four *Vedhas* and the six *Shaasthras*.²

The details of this passage are also evidently dictated by pedagogical concerns—Sathya Sai Baba is in the process of attempting to persuade his devotees that the goddess Gāyatrī, who is often traditionally depicted as five-headed (Fig.17), is in fact ‘not a goddess’, but rather the five-lined *Gāyatrī-mantra* [the most widely recited of vedic verses]. This is another connection through resemblance, and one which, in turn, he goes on to interiorize—claiming that it describes five spiritual ‘aspects’ that are ‘within each of us’.

As we saw earlier, Sathya Sai Baba often emphasizes the “moral” of his stories over and above any particular details, and I would note here that he is certainly aware of privileging pedagogical (or, perhaps better, “therapeutic”³) purposes: ‘Mine are



Fig.17 “Not a Goddess”—A devotee’s depiction of Sathya Sai Baba as immanent in Gāyatrī.

¹ (10-10-2005) <http://www.sathyasai.org/discour/2005/do51010.html> [7-9-2006]

² (23-8-1995) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume28/sss28-22.pdf> [7-9-2006]; cf. (18-10-1991) S24 25:284 NB The “six śāstras”, also known as the six *vedāṅgas* (“branches of the Vedas”), as Subhash Kak (1997:399) writes: ‘deal with: *kalpa*, performance of ritual with its basis of geometry, mathematics and calendrics; *shiksha*, phonetics; *chandas*, metrical structures; *nirukta*, etymology; *vyakarana*, grammar; and *jyotisha*, astronomy and other cyclical phenomena’ cf.: Halbfass (1988:352); <http://students.washington.edu/prem/Colloquium04-Doxographies.pdf> [7-9-2006].

³ Cf. Halbfass (1991), pp.243-263.

mixtures’⁴, he states of his speeches, ‘medicine for the mind’. And this is in keeping with the spirit of the Upaniṣads—works of which we saw much in the previous two sections—Brown (1966:32) writes:

The Upanishads... do not teach a single philosophic system nor do they teach a number of systems, for they are not systematic in their method. The advance ideas in a tentative, experimental fashion, disagreeing with one another and exhibiting an ever-changing series of efforts to penetrate the mystery of the cosmos and man’s relation to it.

Brown (1966:32,39) also sees this attitude in the most famous excerpt of the Indian “epic” literature: ‘The Bhagavad Gītā ...is not consistent in its viewpoint, but knows and uses monistic ideas, dualistic ideas, theistic ideas’. Such “inconsistency”, as we will see in this chapter, is typical of this literature as a whole.

But Sathya Sai Baba’s above statement about the ten heads of Rāvaṇa also highlights the fact that (as we have already seen) much of the traditional lore associated with the avatars is—to any even slightly critical eye—patently fabulous. Even Sathya Sai Baba’s statement at the head of this section is an indirect testament to this—he would not need to make such a statement if none of his devotees had any doubts in this regard. Nevertheless, given the suggestion of Elwood (cited earlier, p.127) that Axial Age dawns of an awareness of ‘history’ and the ‘human individual’ may have stimulated the ‘classic expression’ of avatar-like ideas, it probably is significant that the first fully-developed avatar traditions occur in the Indian epic literature, which is more history-like in its form than the earlier, primarily invocatory, prescriptive, or philosophical, traditions. Indeed, as Brockington (1998:27), in his recent survey and synthesis of scholarship on the Sanskrit epics, writes:

It can be argued that the particular character of the epics is in part due to their position at a time of transition, that their apparent historicity lies in the fact of a later period reflecting on an earlier one, and that this reflecting is brought to an end by the transition from an oral to a written tradition. Certainly... the largely pastoral society of the heroic age... is replaced during the period of growth of the epics by a clearly agrarian society.

Brockington does not specifically mention the Axial Age, but Elwood (p.127 above) cites the last two points here as characteristic of this, and we may note that the dates ascribed to the earliest Indian epics (the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*—c.400BCE – c.400CE⁵), also closely align them with this era (cf. p.128,n.4 above)⁶.

⁴ Sathya Sai Baba (21-1-1960) SSS1 25:152

⁵ On the dates of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (c. 400BCE – c. 300 CE), see Brockington (1998), pp.27,379.

⁶ NB For a recent (popular) monograph on the Axial Age see Karen Armstrong (2006).

Parrinder (1970:19) notes that ideas of the avatar find their first mature expression (although not yet under the name *avatāra*) in ‘the Great Epic, the Mahābhārata, Great Indian story’, a ‘narrative of heroic battles... endless myths and moralizings... an encyclopaedia of Indian religion’. As Parrinder (1970:19-20) writes: ‘The term Avatar [i.e. *avatāra*] is relatively late, and an older word for the phenomenon is ‘manifestation’ (*prādurbhāva*)’. But, whilst *prādurbhāva* may be the most common term used for the avatars in the *Mahābhārata*, the term *avatāra* certainly is foreshadowed in this work—both in meaning and form. Indeed, as Parrinder (1970:20) writes, ‘a whole section of the first book of the Epic is called ‘partial Avatar’ (*aṁśāvatarana*), and it gives the first exposition of the purpose and nature of Avatars’. Etymologically, “*avataraṇa*” encapsulates the idea of “descent”, rather than mere “manifestation” (cf. p.73 above). Accordingly, in one of the frame stories of the *Mahābhārata*, as Couture (2001:314-315) describes it, various demons (Dānavas, Rākṣasas) are ‘born among men’ (*samudbhutāḥ*) ‘as kings drunk with war’, necessitating that Nārāyaṇa: ‘together with the gods... should descend from heaven to earth using a portion of himself’ (*aṁśāvatarana*), to ‘throw off the burden of the earth’ (*bhārāvatarana*). If these were mere “manifestations”, they presumably would have no need either to “descend”, or to take human birth as an avatar—in the fullest sense of the term—must (recall Parrinder’s “characteristic”).

Of course, there are many figures in the *Mahābhārata* that do fit the designation “manifestation”. Parrinder (1970:20) writes that:

In the first book of the Epic there are references to the Tortoise, on whose back the gods placed a mountain when they were churning the ocean for the nectar of immortality (*amrita*) [cf. p.189 for Sathya Sai Baba’s views on this].

There is no “preordained birth” (as Bassuk would put it) here—the Tortoise simply appears when needed. Cosmogonic concerns are to the fore in this; amongst other things, the elements of creation emerge from the churning ocean before the nectar is attained⁷. And the waters are a natural setting for a cosmogony; further to what we saw earlier (p.153), Dandekar (1979:159-160) writes:

The assumption of the creation of the universe out of some primal matter is common to many ancient cosmogonies, and the element which is often thought of in this connection is waters [*sic*]. The primal character of the waters is taken for granted, and no question is generally raised in respect of the origin of waters themselves. ...in all periods of the history of Hindu thought, waters have been regarded, in different ways, as the material source of the universe.

⁷ See, e.g., Jan Gonda (1954), pp.128-129.

The Tortoise, as we have seen (p.152), was identified with the creator deity Prajāpati in the Brāhmaṇas; had a shell encompassing the three worlds; and was the ‘lord of the waters’ (in addition to more general associations with fertility), thus being a fit subject for the cosmogonic concerns of this story. And, as was also suggested earlier, his encompassing the three worlds proffers a key resemblance to Viṣṇu. It is not far from here to a full identification of him with this figure, but his story remains that of a cosmogonic “manifestation” rather than a ‘descent’ as such.

Another cosmogonic character, the figure of Nārāyaṇa in the *Mahābhārata*, is a similar case, likewise having connections to water and to Viṣṇu. Matchett (2001: 5-6) writes that:

Whereas Viṣṇu’s strides and his character of pervasiveness link him with the spaciousness of the upper air, Nārāyaṇa’s connections are with water. The most common etymology of his name, from the *Mahābhārata* onwards, indicates this:

The waters are called *nāras*: I gave them the name; therefore I am called Nārāyaṇa, for the waters are my perpetual course.⁸

It has been suggested that these associations arise from the characteristics of the sun—which appears to rise out of, and set into, the ocean (at the eastern and western geographical extremes of India, respectively)—thus linking Nārāyaṇa to Viṣṇu by virtue of solar attributes. As Dandekar (1979:19) writes:

solarization, that is to say, the superimposition, at some stage and for one reason or another, of the solar character upon the divinities who had originally nothing to do with the sun, was another common motif in the evolution of Vedic mythology.

Nevertheless, as we will see, aquatic, rather than photic attributes are most prominent in subsequent imagery associated with Nārāyaṇa, and Kosambi (2002:375ff.) suggests the primary linkage of this figure to the avatars to be through the fact that ‘the first three incarnations [of the “classical” list of ten (see p. 214—i.e. the Fish, the Tortoise, and the Boar)] are associated with a flood or the sea’.

Kosambi also sees another significant connection here, construing the broader textual context of the passage just quoted on Nārāyaṇa as the ‘immediate source of the *Gītā*’, and translating part of it as follows (Nārāyaṇa speaks):

even the gods do not know me in essence. Out of love for thee I shall relate how I create this. ...I am Nārāyaṇa by name, am the origin, the eternal, the immutable: the creator of all things and their destroyer. I am Viṣṇu, I Brahmā, and I Śakra (= Indra)... I am Śiva and Soma, and Prajāpati... I... am the fire-sacrifice. The fire is my mouth, the earth my feet, the sun and moon my eyes; the sky with its (cardinal)

⁸ This is, of course, a folk etymology; see Dandekar (1979:224,n77;257-258) for some discussion of this and some more linguistically accurate etymologies.

directions my body, the wind my mind... the Veda learned sacrifice to me in the divine sacrifices of the gods.... In ancient times it was by me, having assumed the Boar form, that this world, sunk under the waters, was heroically uplifted.... Whenever the way of righteousness becomes faint, and unrighteousness flourishes, then ...do I create a soul⁹.... having entered into a human body, I restore the tranquillity of all. Having created gods and men, Gandharvas, Uragas, Rākṣasas, and all immovable creation I exterminate them by my own illusion (*ātma-māyayā*). ...I am he of the three (world-covering) strides, the soul of all.... I am ...*brahman*.

As Kosambi (2002:377) writes, the parallels between this and the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (especially chapters 10 & 11) ‘may be drawn by anyone’—and there are more to be seen than are given here, and even more in parts that Kosambi does not translate (as he himself notes). Kosambi dates this passage prior to the *Bhagavad-Gītā* on the grounds of ‘the traditional priority of Mārkaṇḍeya’, the narrator of this story (who tells of his encountering Nārāyaṇa in the form of a child after the great deluge at the end of the cycle of *yugas* has destroyed all life, i.e. as a “manifestation”, rather than an avatar), along with ‘the fuller development and intricate construction of the *Gītā*’, but neither of these arguments necessarily entail his conclusion.

Indeed, Brockington (1998:142) writes that much of this passage is ‘clearly late from a consideration of its contents’ (giving a few examples), but this does not preclude the possibility that some parts of the passage in question might be older than the *Bhagavad-Gītā*—itself one of the more recent sections of the *Mahābhārata*. In fact, Brockington (1998: 273) notes that the key parallel passage (quoted in n.9 below) ‘fits more naturally’ into the context here than into the *Bhagavad-Gītā*¹⁰. As Soifer (1990:154) puts it, there was most likely ‘multidirectional interpenetration’ between the epic theophanies and purāṇic avatar accounts. But,

⁹ Or, perhaps better, “do I generate myself”. The Sanskrit of this verse is almost identical to that of *Bhagavad-Gītā* 4:7 (quoted in translation earlier). The verse here is *Mahābhārata* 3:187.26: ‘*yadā yadā ca dharmasya glānir bhavati sattama | abhyutthānam adharmasya tadātmānaṃ sṛjāmy aham*’.

¹⁰ As James Laine (1989:163,n1) notes, the passage also occurs in the *Matsya-Purāṇa*. He cites Zimmer (1972:35-53), but Zimmer translates rather freely, affording little basis for comparison—perhaps only indicating that in this version Viṣṇu has completely taken over the role of Nārāyaṇa. The whole passage also occurs almost word for word in the *Brahma-Purāṇa*. Renate Söhnen and Peter Schreiner (1989;Vol.2:110,n6), in their translation and summary of the *Brahma-Purāṇa*, merely comment that the immediate context of the *Brahma-Purāṇa* equivalent of the key passage just mentioned is a ‘Paraphrase of BhG 4.7-8’; they provide without comment a concordance between the *Mahābhārata* and *Brahma-Purāṇa* versions [Vol.1, p.816]. M. R Yardi (1986:46) assigns the *Mahābhārata* version of the whole passage on stylistic grounds to the author of the *Harivaṃśa* (who he claims to be the penultimate redactor of the epic), but his reasoning (in general), according to Brockington (1998:127) is ‘dubious’. Brockington (1998:142) cites the work of Laine (1989:164) on this passage, but the latter takes the safe option of stating that parts of the *Mahābhārata* version are: ‘much like’; or ‘in accord with’; or ‘paralleled in’ the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. NB On usages of formulaic lists of three or four Vedas in the *Mahābhārata*, see Brockington (1998), p.8.

whether or not this passage is earlier than the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, it exemplifies an important stage in the development of traditional conceptions of the avatar, for it draws together—in one god who “enters” (*pra-√viś*) a human body—most of the figures we have identified as being significant forerunners of the avatars: Indra, Śiva, Prajāpati, the sacrifice, the recipient of the sacrifice, Puruṣa (whose eyes are the sun and moon etc., and whose name the passage goes on use synonymously with Nārāyaṇa), the Boar, *dharma*, *māyā*, *brahman*, and of course Viṣṇu.

Oddly, if the above passage is indeed later than the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, it does not invoke the figure of Kṛṣṇa¹¹, and indeed the origins of the association of Kṛṣṇa with Viṣṇu, are somewhat obscure. Parrinder (1970:29) writes:

How Krishna came to be identified with Vishnu is not clear. It has been suggested that Vāsudeva, one of Krishna’s chief names, comes from Vishnu... [which] may mean ‘active’ or ‘pervading’¹². If it is the latter then the all pervading God could easily be linked with Avatars.

Mahābhārata 5:68.3, a passage explicating the names of Kṛṣṇa, indeed defines ‘Vāsudeva’ in this manner: ‘*vasanāt sarvabhūtānām vasutvād devayonitah | vāsudevas tato vedyo*’ (i.e.: “From his abiding in all beings, from his wealth, [and] from his divine birth, he is known as ‘Vāsudeva’”). “Vasu” is the name of a class of minor vedic nature deities (attendants of Indra)¹³; “*deva*”, “god”, is commonly attached as a suffix to the names of gods when they are applied as personal names to ordinary mortals; and “Vāsudeva” is a patronymic of “Vasudeva”—the name of Kṛṣṇa’s father in many traditions. But Matchett (2001:7n48) notes a suggestion that this last connection was a later device, and that it is ‘very likely that the original name of Kṛṣṇa’s father was Ānakadundubhi’¹⁴. And “Vāsudeva” does seem to be an autonomous divine epithet—Dandekar (1979:212) writes that:

Traditional legends are narrated of Vāsudeva, king of Puṇḍrakas, and Vāsudeva, king of Karavīrapura, each of whom claimed to be the true divine Vāsudeva but whose claim was entirely nullified by the powers of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa.¹⁵

¹¹ Both the *Brahma-Purāṇa* and *Mahābhārata* go on to identify the figure in question with Kṛṣṇa, but not within the portion of verses that are more or less identical in each of them [*Brahma-Purāṇa* 56.4-56.57; *Mahābhārata* 3.186.122-3.187.47]. In contrast, the passage of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* for which Kosambi suggests this to be a prototype does refer to ‘Kṛṣṇa’ (i.e. other than as its orator)—*Bhagavad-Gītā* 10:37 has Kṛṣṇa say: “I am Vāsudeva among the Vṛṣṇis” (*vṛṣṇīnām vāsudevosmi*).

¹² NB Dandekar (1976:42,n86) opines that: ‘The word *viṣṇu* is to be derived from the root *vi* (= to fly)’, suggesting that Viṣṇu’s original form was that of a bird. These origins perhaps led to his identification with the sky/ether (i.e. *ākāśa*), and hence to the meaning noted by Parrinder here.

¹³ CDHMR 342

¹⁴ Cf. Dandekar (1979), p.218,n.52. On the names ‘Vāsudeva’ and ‘Kṛṣṇa’ in early traditions see Dandekar (1979), pp.216-218, and (similarly) Dandekar (1976), p.33ff.

¹⁵ NB Dandekar (1979:212,n20) cites, e.g., *Mahābhārata* 2:13.17-19, and *Harivaṃśa* Appendix 18.

Since Parrinder (1970:29) observes that: ‘The Avatar idea, once conceived, was an excellent method of incorporating various popular personal gods [in this case Vāsudeva] with a transcendent celestial deity [Viṣṇu]’, the early traditional formulations of this idea were thus (perhaps) themselves instrumental in identifying Viṣṇu and Vāsudeva.

This passage quoted above is interesting for another reason also. Sathya Sai Baba, aligning himself with Kṛṣṇa, alludes to the traditions referenced therein in order to decry his many imitators¹⁶:

During the times of Krishna too there was an impostor who went around proclaiming that he was the real Krishna. In fact he dressed like Krishna and pretended to be Krishna. The same was the case during the time of Rama. Jealousy is the root cause for such perverted actions.¹⁷

The specific context of this passage has Sathya Sai Baba recollecting the case of a ‘Hatha Yogi’ who challenged him to a “walking-on-water” contest. He refuses to accept the challenge, but, by invoking his avatar persona, perhaps avoids the potentially damaging conclusion that he lacks the ability to walk on water, and puts himself in a class (avatar) above that of his challenger, a mere ‘Yogi’.

In any case, Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata*, in having an earthly father, is very much an avatar—this is no mere “manifestation”. Parrinder (1970:30) writes:

There is no doubt that Krishna has a human body, and some human limitations. Occasionally he seems to admit his ignorance. He eats drinks plays sleeps, and finally dies. ...But along with this there are many divine traits. ...The Epic says that as a child with his bare hands he killed a giant (a Dānava) in the form of a bull, and while being brought up by cowherds [*gopās* and *gopīs*] he killed other demons.¹⁸

Dandekar (1976:43) suggests that a connection between Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu was effected through resemblances to the penultimate point here:

It is also not unlikely that the popular understanding—or rather misunderstanding—of the Ṛgvedic Viṣṇu’s epithet *gopā* and of the *gāvaḥ* as his highest abode¹⁹ also helped in the identification of the popular god Kṛṣṇa with the Vedic Viṣṇu.

¹⁶ For a list of Sathya Sai Baba imitators see <http://saicopycats.blogspot.com/> [21-7-2006].

¹⁷ (5-10-2000) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/doo1005.html> [16-5-2007]

¹⁸ Parrinder (1970), p.30. NB Brockington (1998:469) rightly points out that ‘superhuman abilities ...are part of the hyperbole natural to any epic tradition, just as are the comparisons to a deity which often accompany any display of them’, arguing thereby that the like of these do not entail avatar status (and so bolstering his argument against the inherent divinity of Rāma, see below), but this is a subtle point, and one which—if perhaps originally applicable to the Indian epics—was soon overlooked (traditionally), to the extent that, as Parrinder (1970:29) notes, Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata*: ‘has four arms, holding conch-shell, discus and mace in his hands [the insignia of Viṣṇu (cf. Fig.12b above)]. This is his normal embodied form, distinct from his transfigured forms’.

¹⁹ See Dandekar (1976), p.39.

In addition to identification through resemblance, this highlights the pervasive influence of folk-etymology on traditional Indian religious thinking²⁰. Sathya Sai Baba's not infrequent forays in this direction—which Babb (1986:171) describes as 'one of his most characteristic rhetorical devices'—are nothing new.

Brockington (1998:277,290,282) writes that: 'The *avatāra* theory seems to have evolved in the *Mahābhārata* with the identification of Nārāyaṇa with Vāsudeva, who came to be seen as his human incarnation [i.e. Kṛṣṇa]', suggesting that Viṣṇu does not feature strongly in this regard. But, one brief passage that he cites *does* provide an obvious link between all of these figures—albeit that Viṣṇu is not mentioned by name. He writes that 'the incarnation [of "Nārāyaṇa-Vāsudeva"²¹] as Vāmana, the dwarf, has developed from the feat attributed to Viṣṇu in the *Ṛgveda* of striding through the universe'. And, since the story in question later becomes one of *the* major and definitive avatar accounts, we may assume that it was instrumental in connecting, and eventually identifying these important figures²². Indeed, Parrinder (1970:25) notes references to this story in the *Mahābhārata* that do explicitly name the dwarf as Viṣṇu²³:

In the Epic Vishnu is born in one Avatar as a dwarf, a Brahmin with matted locks, sacrificial thread, ascetic's staff and water pot. He came to the demon Bali who had gained control of the world and threatened even the gods by his ascetic and magical powers. Vishnu requested a boon of three paces of ground. Bali granted this, and Vishnu as dwarf then took three huge strides across the universe, so gaining it all from the demon. The Epic adds that from him all the gods had their being and the world is pervaded by Vishnu.

In any case, obviously, some of the vedic and brāhmaṇic attributes of Viṣṇu (his three cosmogonic strides, his identity as a dwarven champion of the gods) have come to be incorporated into a developed avatar narrative²⁴.

Hiltebeitel (1990:358-359) cites Dumézil as seeing 'the most basic features of the Indian epic story in terms of *transpositions from myth*... [into] "humanized" or

²⁰ NB For an early case of this, see, for example, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8:3:4.

²¹ So in *Mahābhārata* 12.326, to which he refers.

²² NB Brockington (1998:287) does note some other avatar figures who are evidently identified with Viṣṇu (and Nārāyaṇa) in the *Mahābhārata*—viz. Kalkin (on whom, in relation to Sathya Sai Baba, see Ruhela (1996b) and p.339 below) and 'Hayagriva', the 'horse-headed' avatar.

²³ Parrinder cites *Mahābhārata* 3:270 [3:299 in the critical edition] and 5:10. In the former of these passages at least (I was not able to locate the latter in the critical edition from which I am working), the deity in question is explicitly referred to as Viṣṇu.

²⁴ NB Brockington (1998:282) cites a German study that delineates how: 'The older myth of the *trivikrama* ["three strides" of Viṣṇu] was transformed in the *Mahābhārata* into the Vāmana legend by introducing Bali as the enemy'.

“historicized” form’, and what we have here can perhaps be partially understood in this light. But, as indicated earlier, Hildebeitel suggests that in the formation of the epics, “transposition” was not as important as resemblance—the act of ‘seeing connections’—i.e. between existing heroic or folk stories and the vedic traditions:

the form of a story fully “transposed” from a prior level of meaning would be allegory, not epic. Although it is popular in India to view it as such... I do not see the *epic* as an allegory.

Accordingly, connection through resemblance—in its post-upaniṣadic sense, with an emphasis on “identity”—may hold the key to the identification of Vāsudeva, Nārāyaṇa and Viṣṇu. Indeed, Brockington (1998:290) cites a suggestion based on the ‘etymologies and use’ of the names of these two figures (of which we saw something above) that ‘the composite deity represents a type of deity characterised by immanence’—the “pervasiveness” of these figures, whether through atmospheric or aquatic attributes, thus providing the necessary resemblance²⁵.

This, and all of the above, at least hint at some plausible conditions from which we may understand the epic avatar traditions to have emerged. Another major factor in this is Rāma’s identity as an avatar in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (c.200BCE–c.200CE), a work attributed to the “first poet”, Vālmīki. In this epic tale, Rāvaṇa, a demon, has won a divine boon of immunity to death by any species (gods included) except the human (who he did not think a threat). Thus, as Pollock (1991:40) notes, here and in some of the other avatar tales (especially those of Vāmana and Narasiṃha):

a situation is contrived that points up the incapacity of the gods, or of any other divine or semi-divine being, to confront and master evil on their own.... Another creature—man—is required; but being naturally powerless man needs the infusion of Viṣṇu’s power.... These... are men who do what, for some reason, gods cannot. Not merely more than human, they are in some way more than divine.

This, coupled with Rāma’s (divine) kingship, leads Pollock to conclude that Rāma’s identity as an avatar is integral to even the earliest tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Brockington (1998:465-466;467ff.), however, sees Rāma as originally being a purely ‘martial’ and ‘moral’ hero, and opts for ‘the more usual Western view of Rāma’s gradual deification by growing identification with Viṣṇu’. He cites especially a review of Pollock’s work by Richard Lariviere (1993), who writes:

²⁵ NB Brockington (1998:471) references some “late interpolations” in the *Rāmāyaṇa* that may have contributed from the other direction to this connection, and he notes a suggestion that ‘there are three stages to the process [by which this connection was made in the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a whole]: firstly Rāma, along with his brothers, is presented as an incarnation of Viṣṇu, secondly Rāma is still identified with Viṣṇu but now also with Nārāyaṇa, and thirdly Rāma is identified with Nārāyaṇa-Vāsudeva (and Viṣṇu himself is treated as a manifestation of Nārāyaṇa)’. Cf. Hildebeitel (2003).

One question which Pollock does not address is that of the very subtlety of this assertion of [Rāma's] divinity. Why is the text shy about asserting the divinity of Rāma if that divinity was part of the uninterpolated fabric of the epic from the beginning? Why doesn't the text simply come right out and say that Rāma is god? Why leave such an important point to the reader to discover.... Why can we not be ...criticized for not taking at face value the assertions that are explicitly and repeatedly stated throughout the epic that Rāma is simply a mortal?

But, in an article of which Brockington is evidently unaware, Robert Goldman (1995:80-82) perhaps provides an answer to these questions—writing that:

To a great extent scholars have failed to recognize the fact that an epic hero was understood to be more than human.... Crucial to the vital notion of *līlā* or play that provides the *raison d'être* for the *avatāra* in the Sanskrit epics is the idea that God on the earth should not be universally or consistently recognized as such. ...The epic antagonists... are, with few and partial exception, utterly unaware of the divinity of the incarnations and indeed often speak contemptuously of [them]. ...The supporters, friends, and kinsmen of these gods on earth are at best only occasionally aware of their true divinity, frequently forgetting about it immediately after a revelation or demonstration. Only certain virtually omniscient figures such as gods, departed spirits, and ṛṣis seem to have an unclouded and uninterrupted perception of the godhood of the god.

And, whether or not the epic heroes were viewed in this manner from the earliest stages of the works in question, the points he raises here are important.

Echoes of such ideas are also integral to Sathya Sai Baba's avatar persona—it flourishes because of, rather than despite of, these. Thus, for example, Sathya Sai Baba is asked: 'Bhagavan, it is really surprising that You manifest and You express Yourself to some, and You hide Yourself to many!' And he replies: 'It is out of compassion for you all. Because of compassion for you, I see that many people don't understand Me. It is also My leela'²⁶. And, elsewhere, he says:

In the previous ages... the Incarnations of the Lord were not accepted as such by many. Even their parents, kinsmen, and comrades hesitated to adore them. Only a few sages... knew their reality. ...today in this *Kali yuga*, while the currents of contradiction and controversy are undermining faith and adoration, the good fortune that has brought you face to face with Me is something for which you must thank your merit won through many lives.²⁷

By invoking traditional authority in this way, Sathya Sai Baba strengthens his avatar persona, removes any onus upon himself to "prove" his divinity, and—via the

²⁶ http://groups.yahoo.com/group/saidevotees_worldnet/message/1880 [12-7-2007]

²⁷ Sathya Sai Baba (23-11-1968) S8 45:244-245 NB As Sarkar (1997:311-312) notes, the 'many evils' of the Kali Yuga 'traditionally include ...Brahmans corrupted by too much rational argument'. Sathya Sai Baba is also perhaps drawing here upon Ramakrishna (1965), p.217.

law of supply-and-demand—augments the value that his devotees feel they should place upon their relationships with him.

Importantly, in light of what we saw in Section 3.1, Brockington offers little rebuttal of Pollock's claims attributing significance of the divine status of kings to Rāma's identity as an avatar. But, Brockington (1998:469) does show that 'the possible hints at Rāma's divinity in the earlier parts of the text are limited in number and usually require later attitudes to be read into them if they are to be identified as such', and he points out some good evidence that testifies to a gradual apotheosis of Rāma over a multi-stage process. Interestingly, there is further confirmation here of the importance of the episteme of resemblance—of which we have seen so much—as Brockington (1998:464,470-471) writes of Rāma that: 'The elevation of his character, combined with his standing as a prince, made it natural to compare him with the gods and ultimately to identify him as divine', initially through connections with Indra [who he obviously resembles as a martially powerful royal figure], and then—faced with the [lack of resemblance occasioned by] moral dimensions of the 'decline' of Indra²⁸—with Viṣṇu (whose suitability to succeed Indra, in other ways, we saw earlier), and eventually with Nārāyaṇa.

Even Sathya Sai Baba acknowledges (in his own way) that the figure of Rāma is gradually deified in the *Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa*:

Valmiki, at the beginning of the Ramayana was swayed by the idea that Rama was the ideal man. But during the course of his writing, he was overpowered by the feeling that Rama was Divinity itself and concluded, at the end of the epic, that Rama was the Embodiment of Divinity.²⁹

And certainly, more so than in the case of Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata*, human—and especially "ideal" human—traits of Rāma are foregrounded in the *Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa*. Dandekar (1976:45,n105) notes that Rāma has often been perceived by Hindu tradition as 'the absolute ideal for all humanity', and Sathya Sai Baba goes on from the above to highlight this in respect to the most popular Hindi version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Rāmacaritamānasa* by Tulsī Dās (1543-1623), which he contrasts with Vālmiki's version: 'Tulsidas began his Ramayana with the firm faith that Rama was verily Lord Narayana Himself and concluded emphasising the fact that Rama was the ideal man'. Sathya Sai Baba further contrasts the attitude of Vālmiki with that of the author of the most influential Tamil version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*—Kampaṇ (12th century CE)—who, he says, was 'moved by the feeling

²⁸ See p.130,n.9 above.

²⁹ (1996) <http://www.ssbpt.info/summershowers/ss1996/ss1996-02.pdf> [14-6-2002]

that man is God and God is man'. As David Shulman (1987:274,284-285) writes, 'for Kampan there is no doubt that Rāma is God in human form', but, even so:

if, in Vālmīki, the hero discovers at certain crucial junctures, that he is really a god, in Kampan God discovers what it means to be a man. ...The god suddenly sees himself in all his human limitations — helpless, guilty, amnesiac, disgraced.

There is some justification in all of this for Parrinder's (1970:121) conclusion: '*The lives of Avatars mingle divine and human. ...in the story of Rāma; the youth, marriage, renunciation, sufferings and triumph all make up a human picture*'³⁰.

But, whilst Parrinder calls Rāma an avatar, Brockington (1998:463) notes that 'the terms *avatāra* and the earlier *prādurbhāva*, together with the verbs from which they derive, do not occur in the text [of Vālmīki] in their specialized religious sense'. Sometimes, Rāma is simply equated with other divinities—Parrinder (1970:66) writes (paraphrasing *Rāmāyaṇa* 1:16-18): 'he is Vishnu, the boar, the dwarf, Krishna, creator of Indra and the gods, Purusha, Om, the Vedas, the Himalayas, the imperishable Brahman itself'. This recalls the vedic "merging of the gods" motif, and anticipates ideas of the *viśvarūpa*, the "universal form", noted above, which later retellings of the Rāma story (e.g. *Adhyātma-Rāmāyaṇa* 1:3.19ff.) sometimes invoke. Whether or not such passages were only added in the later phases of the composition of the *Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa* (and not all agree with Brockington that this was the case)³¹, such retellings more consistently attribute avatarhood to Rāma—I will have something to say of this in subsequent sections (4.4 & 6.2). And Sathya Sai Baba, as we have already seen and will further see, often aligns himself with Rāma as an avatar in this more consistent sense.

Interestingly, he presents himself as rectifying a historical process of decline in the teachings of previous avatars and religious leaders, and he specifically applies this type of reasoning to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, using it to promote his own lengthy written retelling of this work, the *Ramakatha Rasavahini*³²: 'Rama's life, over the ages, has been altered and distorted somewhat, and Swami's story of Rama will be a classic through several Yugas'³³. Sathya Sai Baba also occasionally shows his devo-

³⁰ NB Aurobindo (1958:412-420) reflects upon this at length.

³¹ I.e., especially, Goldman, Hildebeitel and Pollock (cited above).

³² NB Based upon a close reading of this work that I undertook for one of my undergraduate papers, I can say that it differs significantly from the *Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa*, but does evince some close parallels with the *Adhyātma-Rāmāyaṇa* (on which see pp.249,373ff. below). It might be an interesting exercise for someone to compare *Ramakatha Rasavahini* to Telugu *Rāmāyaṇa* traditions (some of which also bear the title *Rāmakaṭha*) or even with Kampan's Tamil version, upon which these are based—I did not have access to English translations of any of these, if indeed such translations exist.

³³ C 118

tees what he claims to be relics from the time of Rāma—“magically” summoning the same (Fig.18)³⁴, dramatically confirming his view, cited at the beginning of this section, that Rāma is a historical figure.

He does, however, qualify the historicity of his own *Ramakatha Rasavahini*, prefacing it with a statement that:

People do not realise that the study of history must enrich life and make it meaningful and worth-while, rather than cater to the appetite for paltry facts and petty ideas.³⁵

This, what’s more, he situates in a chapter entitled ‘Rama - Prince and Principle’, in which he goes on to assert that:

The story of Rama is not the story of an individual ; it is the story of the Universe ! Rama is the Personification of the basic Universal in all beings. ...The story deals not with a period that is past, but with the present and future without end, with beginningless eternal Time!³⁶

Not that he is denying that he considers the *Rāmāyaṇa* to be historical—the chapter here is titled “Prince *and* Principle”—but it is clear that he views such allegorical spiritualized interpretations of the avatars as being of the greatest significance. In fact, he elsewhere explicitly states that:

Rama was a real person and an Avatar. And Dasaratha was His father. Krishna was real and the events of His Avatara were real. But in themselves, the battles and troubles of these families are unimportant. What is of lasting significance is the inner spiritual significance of the happening.³⁷

And he most often makes statements that emphasize this “spiritual significance”, employing a typical charismatic turn of phrase to argue that: ‘The *Mahaabhaaritha* War is not a chapter in ancient history; it is taking place in every human



Fig.18 Sathya Sai Baba holding what he claims to be a ring that was worn by Rāma—claiming, moreover, to have procured the same by dint of his divine power.

³⁴ NB Other examples are given at the website from which this image comes (cited on p.10 above).

³⁵ RRV, Vol.1, p.4

³⁶ RRV, Vol.1, p.9

³⁷ C 118 NB I will say more about this and the “historicity” of the avatars, in Chapter 6, pp.376ff.

breast, between the forces of good and evil’³⁸. Or he says of the Tortoise avatar:

The Grace of God is the Tortoise incarnation, for the Lord Himself comes to the rescue, once He knows that you are earnestly seeking the secret of Immortality: He comes, silently and unobserved, as the tortoise did, holding the *manana* ([mental] reflection) process unimpaired and serving as the steady base of all spiritual practice. Many things emerge from the mind, when churned, but the wise wait patiently for the appearance of the guarantor of Immortality [(13-1-1965) S5 1:2].

Again, wordplay based on resemblance features prominently here—in the traditional story (p.179 above)³⁹, the tortoise acts as a (physical) base for the churning (*manthana*—hence the pun above) of the primordial ocean to produce the ambrosial ‘*amṛta*’, the ‘Nectar of Immortality’ (above given a metaphysical counterpart), before which event various tantalizing objects and a deadly poison must emerge from the ocean (a common metaphor for the mind).

In these last examples, in the terms that I have been using, ethicization and interiorization join spiritualization as types of “innovation” that we might attribute to Sathya Sai Baba. But, as I noted earlier, “innovation” ought best to be considered a modality of “tradition” and Edward Shils (1971:145) points out that, in society in general, even when there is a (charismatic) “rejection” of tradition, ‘the very idiom of rejection, the standards of rejection are almost always acquired from some marginal strand of the general constellation of traditions which govern or are available in the society’. And in the Indian epic context that we are considering, such strands *are* in evidence. J. Miller (1986:63) cites a traditional commentary on the *Harivaṃśa*⁴⁰ which states that the ‘churning of the ocean typifies ascetic penance and the ambrosia is final liberation’⁴¹, and the spirit of this type of interpretation is very much evident in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*—a more-or-less independent excerpt of the *Mahābhārata* and one which, originally at least, was very much a “marginal” tradition (*Bhagavad-Gītā* 18:67,68 makes clear that this is a work for austere devotees only). It is to this important work that I will now turn.

³⁸ Sathya Sai Baba (19-8-1965) S5 36:204

³⁹ NB Sathya Sai Baba calls the Tortoise an ‘incarnation’ (i.e. *avatāra*), as is done in, for example, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 8:6-7 [and *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa* 1:9.87—Brockington (1998:280)], but the *Mahābhārata* [1:16.10-11], as I indicated earlier, merely presents this figure as the king of the tortoises.

⁴⁰ The *Harivaṃśa*, the “Lineage of Hari (Kṛṣṇa)”, is generally believed to have been added c.300CE as a ‘supplement’ (*khila*) to the *Mahābhārata*.

⁴¹ NB Chandaka Sri Krishna (2004:190ff.) cites Potana’s 15th century Telugu version of the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*—of which Sathya Sai Baba is undoubtedly aware (see p.238,n.2 below)—as presenting a similar viewpoint (if perhaps more influenced by yogic/tantric terminology).

3.5 “God” in the Gītā

The Lord is devoid of attachment or hatred.

...It is His nature to support the right and admonish the wrong.

...He is Himself the supreme example of the teachings of the Geetha.

He reveals Himself in the Geetha; the Geetha is the one text wherefrom

you can get a complete picture of the nature and characteristics of *Avathaars*.¹

The *Bhagavad-Gītā* (c.1st–3rd centuries CE²)—the most famous portion of the *Mahābhārata*—is undoubtedly the most influential traditional exposition of avatar ideas; we have already seen something of its import. We have also seen a strong indication that it may have had a major formative influence on the ideas of Sathya Sai Baba (p.160 above), and the passage quoted here can only support this suggestion. In addition to his explicitly praising this work, his references to ‘attachment or hatred’, ‘right’ (i.e. *dharma*) and ‘wrong’, echo major points made in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. And, whilst the term *avatāra* does not occur in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (Kṛṣṇa, the principal interlocutor and deity in this work, is most commonly referred to therein as *Bhagavān*, “God” or “the Lord”), most subsequent traditions understand this work as being definitive of avatars—to the extent that Sathya Sai Baba’s above-quoted testimony to this effect is only slightly hyperbolic.

Like the *Mahābhārata* as a whole, the *Bhagavad-Gītā* draws heavily upon, or at least connects itself to (in various ways, akin to those encountered earlier), many previous traditional ideas. Dandekar (1979:255) writes that it:

cannot boast any distinct philosophical system of its own; it... sought to evolve a loose philosophical synthesis. Synthesis in all fields was, verily, the watchword of the new Kṛṣṇaism.

And other scholars have certainly picked up on this “watchword”—Christian Lindtner (1995:201) characterizes the *Bhagavad-Gītā* as an ‘attempt to synthesize a wide variety of ideas from heterogeneous historical origins’, and Gerald Larson (1975:660) writes that this work:

has numerous metaphysical discussions which represent efforts to synthesize older Buddhist and Jain traditions, Sāṃkhya and Yoga traditions and Vedic-Upaniṣadic orthodoxy with what appear to be emerging traditions of theistic devotion.

Larson goes on to note ‘what Kosambi and Bharati have called respectively its “superb inconsistency” and its “lending itself... to any ideological slant”’. I noted something akin to this earlier, and we have seen it in Sathya Sai Baba’s ideas too.

¹ Sathya Sai Baba (19-8-1965) S5 36:204

² Brockington (1998:147-148) offers these dates on the grounds of stylistic similarities of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* to the most recent sections of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

But this is an attempted synthesis, not simply a case of inconsistent eclecticism, for the role of Kṛṣṇa as a deity (rather than merely as an interlocutor) in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* does provide, as Lindtner (1995:201) writes, a ‘unified intention’ to the text—there is a marked tendency to:

reduce everything to Kṛṣṇa, to Bhagavat, a personal god as well as a cosmic principal. ...the one and all authority in whom all conflicts are supposed to be reconciled. The BG, in other words, is an excellent example of typical Indian “inclusivism”.

In the same way, as we have seen (and will see in Chapter 4), Sathya Sai Baba, in addition to promoting his broader spiritual and ethical agendas, has a tendency to reduce many of his traditional references to a focus upon his own identity as the avatar, or upon his favoured non-dualistic interpretation of the “cosmic principle”.

Patrick Olivelle (1986:867) gives a basic definition of the term “inclusivism”, citing Paul Hacker, who first applied the term to Indian religions, as: ‘claiming for, and thus including in, one’s own religion what really belongs to an alien sect’. He goes on to write that:

Its most comprehensive application, according to Hacker, is found in neo-Hindus such as Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan who see Hinduism as the point of union of all religions.

As noted above, however, there is a sense in which the *Bhagavad-Gītā* does the same (see also p.148); indeed, as Wilhelm Halbfass (1988:417-418) notes, Hacker considered this aspect of Kṛṣṇa’s persona in this work as ‘an exemplary case of inclusivism’. We have already seen something of the influence of Vivekananda on Sathya Sai Baba, and will see much more of this (and a little of Radhakrishnan) later (Chapter 5 below), and I noted earlier that popularity of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* with such figures (p.93). Certainly, Sathya Sai Baba claims that: ‘The Sai religion... is the essence of all faiths and religions’³.

Olivelle notes an observation by Halbfass that:

Hacker wears two hats: he is both an Indologist and a Christian theologian.... ‘Inclusivism’ in his hands is more an instrument of criticism of Indian religion and thought coupled with an implicit defence of European and Christian thought than a genuine category for understanding the Indian intellectual history.

But, whilst Olivelle thus concludes that ‘the category of ‘inclusivism’ is a more useful tool for studying the thought of this important German scholar [Hacker] than for unravelling the complex intellectual history of India’, major problem here seems to be with Hacker’s assertion that inclusivism is somehow exclusively In-

³ Sathya Sai Baba (1-10-1976) S13 23:146

dian—as opposed to being, as Olivelle puts it, ‘a common tendency of human thought’⁴. Olivelle (quoting Halbfass) points out that early (19th c.) Christian Indologists and missionaries had an influence on Neo-Hinduism, and that, since some of them ‘depict Christianity as the fulfilment of all religions’, it is likely that ‘[s]ome of the neo-Hindu rhetoric... is more a reflection of such missionary ‘inclusivism’ than the manifestation of the inclusivistic spirit of India’. But Halbfass (1985:12-13), for his part, only goes so far as to conclude that inclusivism is ‘not exclusively Indian, but more conspicuous in India than elsewhere’. Moreover, as Olivelle himself notes, Albrecht Wezler, co-author of the study he is reviewing, concludes that ‘Hacker’s point... that inclusivistic arguments characterize the attitude of new and younger religious traditions vis-à-vis older and more established ones... [is] valid and significant’⁵.

In this understanding, inclusivism is an appeal to the traditional authority engendered by these “more-established” religious traditions, and such appeals are certainly much in evidence in our material. But there is something else happening here. The tendency to ‘reduce everything to Kṛṣṇa’ (or some other deity) invokes charismatic authority—i.e.: “It is written...” (in the “alien” traditions that are sought for inclusion), “but I say unto you...” (all these are really Kṛṣṇa). Indeed, even when the *Bhagavad-Gītā* makes one of its few direct and inclusivistic appeals to traditional authority, this is mediated through a reference to Kṛṣṇa’s (supposedly) perpetual presence. Thus, Parrinder (1970:36) writes that:

Several times the Upanishadic teachers declared that their words had been revealed by Brahmā [the Creator] to the ancient sages. Krishna in the Gītā [4:1-3] asserts that it was he himself who had told these truths to past sages; the doctrines had lapsed in the course of time but they are now revealed again.

Of course, the *Bhagavad-Gītā* does have much basis in earlier traditions, and the reference to the supposed origin of the upaniṣadic teachings is not simply fabricated. But the *Bhagavad-Gītā* is portrayed as the *same* doctrine as was taught in earlier times, when in fact, as we will see, it contains much that is novel.

Indeed, the *Bhagavad-Gītā* sometimes shows evidence of tensions that it does not simply seek to resolve through an inclusivistic synthesis—*Bhagavad-Gītā* 2:42-44 derides persons who:

give vent to flowery words, lacking discernment, delighting in the Veda’s lore... their

⁴ For details of this see Halbfass (1988), pp.415-418; cf. p.261 below.

⁵ There is also a general contrast with Christian claims of Jesus as the “only way”. NB For more on “inclusivism” see Halbfass (1988), pp.349-368;403-418, and Section 4.4 below.

words preach [re-]birth as the fruit of works and expatiate about the niceties of ritual by which pleasure and power can be achieved.⁶

And Sathya Sai Baba sometimes makes similar criticisms of the state of affairs in religion today: ‘cleverness increases and chokes sincerity and straightforwardness in spiritual matters and in the relationship between God and Man’⁷; ‘Immorality has put on the garb of morality and is enticing man into the morass of sin’⁸. Again, these are typical “charismatic” statements: “It is written that what looks like sanctity or morality is indeed such, but I say unto you that it is not so”.

Whilst we have seen that Sathya Sai Baba generally takes an inclusivistic stance on the Vedas (encouraging vedic chanting and regularly sponsoring vedic rituals), any disagreement between his teachings and those of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* is rare. Indeed, in presenting himself as reviving yet other traditions, he reiterates the sentiments of *Bhagavad-Gītā* 4:1-3 (cited by Parrinder above):

As time goes on, the significant factors of the spiritual path are lost. ...That which was known of the spiritual path after the time of Rama was no longer there at the time of Krishna. And that which Krishna taught was gone when Sai came. It is the same with the Buddhists, the Moslems and the Jains.⁹

Here again we have inclusivism, with some obviously “alien” traditions, and with a charismatic twist—for Sathya Sai Baba avers of himself (elsewhere, but in an analogous context): ‘it is also the self-same Rama and the self-same Krishna who is here this day’¹⁰. Indeed, the extent of his identification with Kṛṣṇa is such that, as Haraldsson (1997:130)—reporting the recollections of one of Sathya Sai Baba early devotees—writes: ‘In the course of a public speech he used to quote from the Bhagavad Gita. Then during his speech he would start to talk as if he were Lord Krishna at that time’. We saw something akin to this earlier, with Sathya Sai Baba speaking of his “old *bhaktas*” from the time of Kṛṣṇa (p.121).

The idea of avatars being “repeated” descents a deity (Parrinder’s sixth “characteristic” of the avatars) is crucial to this. Accordingly, Sathya Sai Baba admonishes a devotee who inadvertently posits a distinction between him and Kṛṣṇa—allowing only a reference to ‘the Krishna body’ and ‘the Sathya Sai body’¹¹—and, as Par-

⁶ Zaehner (1969), p.143

⁷ (22-10-1966) <http://sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volumeo6/ssso6-34.pdf> [14-6-2007] NB This is also a common theme of traditional descriptions of the *Kali-yuga*—see p.186,n.27 above.

⁸ (18-8-1968) <http://sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volumeo8/ssso8-28.pdf> [14-6-2007]

⁹ C XXXI 84 (1968-78)

¹⁰ C V 29

¹¹ C XL 108

rinder (1970:36) describes it, the *Bhagavad-Gītā* goes on from the first of its above-quoted proclamations to raise and answer an objection to its views via reincarnational ideology: ‘these wise men had lived before him, so how could Krishna have taught them? Krishna replied that he had had many births’. As Hacker (1960:425) observes, the term *janma*, which ‘describes Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa’s appearance in this world’ in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, ‘can also be used to express the idea of rebirth in metempsychosis’; ‘in fact, it may be said that one of the roots of the *avatāra* doctrine is the belief in metempsychosis’. And Soifer (1976:130) agrees, writing that: ‘The concept which structures the *avatāra* doctrine undergirds all of Indian religion: the theory of rebirth’.

The basis for the idea that avatars are repeated is often taken to be *Bhagavad-Gītā* 4:7-8—two verses put in the mouth of Kṛṣṇa—the veritable *locus classicus* of the avatar traditions. Parrinder (1970:36-37) translates:

*Whenever there appears
A languishing of Righteousness (dharma)
When Unrighteousness (adharma) arises
Then I send forth (generate) Myself...*

*For protection of the virtuous,
For destruction of the wicked
For the establishment of Right,
Age after age I come into being.*

This, we may note, is a synthesis of ideas we encountered in previous sections: *dharma*, *yuga*, and the protection/punishment motif associated with Viṣṇu and the institution of (divine) kingship¹².

Parrinder (1970:123,224), like Hacker and Soifer, writes of the avatars that their ‘repetition fits the idea of reincarnation’, but he does note that ‘while Krishna comes ‘age after age’ (*yuge-yuge*), yet these ages are separated by many thousands of years, so that the Avatar is *the* Incarnation for the present world era’, and we earlier saw something of the importance of this point for Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar claim. Moreover, as we will see (p.312), Sathya Sai Baba tells his devotees that they will not again have an opportunity like that presented by his current avatar for another 2000 years (i.e. for many lifetimes)—but he is not consistent in this.

He sometimes quotes in application to himself the above *Bhagavad-Gītā* verses:

Yadaa yadaa hi dharmasya glaanir bhavathi, Bhaaratha, Abhyuththaanam ad-

¹² See pp.135,135,165,136 respectively. NB Brockington (1998:277,n102) adds that it ‘may have been influenced by the Buddhist concept of former Buddhas’ (Cf. p.127,n.3 above).

harmasya tadh aathmaanam srujaamyaham... Parithraanaaya saadhuunaam, vi-naasaayacha dhushkrutaam, dharma samsthaapanaarthaaya sambhavaami yuge yuge... *Whenever dharma declines, I restore it and put down the forces which cause the decline, by assuming a form... I am born again and again in every crisis in order to protect the good, punish the wicked and restore dharma.*¹³

Editorial comments are rare in the published versions of Sathya Sai Baba's discourses, but his more normally reserved editors trumpet this as an '*announcement of His Identity with the source of all avathaars*', and, interestingly (and also uncharacteristically), they note something of the extraordinary circumstances in which he made this announcement—this claim is a prelude to a: '*Speech delivered after the offering of flower-garlands by devotees continuously at one sitting, from 10-30 a.m. till 7-30 p.m.*'. In this context it is perhaps small wonder that Sathya Sai Baba should make such a strong pronouncement of his own self-importance.

But the translation here of 'yuge yuge' ('Age after age' in Parrinder's reckoning) as '*in every crisis*' (presumably an English rendering of a Telugu gloss by Sathya Sai Baba to this effect) is significant. Indeed, Sathya Sai Baba, in the inscription of a *yantra* (sacred diagram) dedicated to him, is said to have changed the second half of *Bhagavad-Gītā* 4:8 from "*sambhavāmi yuge yuge*" (I incarnate from age to age) to read "*sambhavāmi pade pade*" (I incarnate from time to time [or "on every occasion"])¹⁴. As Parrinder (1970:22) notes, elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*, the avatars are explicitly 'distributed between the ages'. Sathya Sai Baba's modification of this verse could thus perhaps be seen as an attempt to harmonise his identification of himself as the Kalki avatar (see p.339 below)—traditionally predicted to make an appearance at the end of the present *yuga*—with a claim he makes elsewhere that the present *yuga* is little over half complete¹⁵.

However, despite the changed wording, his version perhaps more closely gives the sense of the original *Bhagavad-Gītā* verse—for only under the influence of later stages in the development of avatar concepts did this come to be interpreted as referring to cosmological "ages" (no account of these is given in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*). The word *yuga* can refer to various periods of time, some of them extremely short, and as Parrinder (1970:56) notes, some traditional commentators on the *Bhagavad-Gītā* hold that 'yuge-yuge... implies that the lord becomes incarnate whenever he chooses, not that his Avatars are confined to any particular age'. In

¹³ Sathya Sai Baba (23-11-1964) S4 38:223 NB The inverse italics here are a feature of the original.

¹⁴ G.V. Subba Rao, talk at Prashanthi Nilayam on *Śrī Sai Chakra* (2000), cf. http://www.sssbpt.org/Pages/Specially/Memoirs_Gokak.htm [7-3-2007] and MW.

¹⁵ C (1968-78) II 20

fact, as we will see (p.214), some of the *Purāṇas* posit “innumerable” avatars, and, of course, many modern figures have claimed avatar status without much redefining the details of the traditional *yuga* system—to the extent that Sathya Sai Baba elsewhere goes so far as to say that the *Bhagavad-Gītā* passage in question here ‘has been quoted so often and by so many that it has lost all significance’¹⁶. Parrinder’s above-cited assertion of the difference in frequency between ordinary human (re-)incarnations and those of the avatar is thus problematic—applicable in some circumstances, but not so in others.

And some other differences that Parrinder (1970:225-226) notes between the avatars and ordinary mortals prove to be similarly fuzzy—at least in the light of Sathya Sai Baba’s views. Parrinder writes that, in *Bhagavad-Gītā* 4:5:

The divine manifestation appears to be the same as that of men, in happening many times; the difference is that Krishna knows the details of all his previous births which the man Arjuna [the epic hero to whom the *Gītā* is addressed] did not.

He progresses to use this as evidence that there is ‘an abiding difference between God and man’, and there *is* something in this. Indeed, Sathya Sai Baba draws upon this contrast, claiming, for example, that—in contradistinction to ordinary mortals—he ‘never sleeps’¹⁷ but, rather, spends the time recollecting his previous lives (the implication being that ordinary persons might do likewise, if they were able). But, at other times, for him, this distinction is not absolute:

You might ask, “How is it, then, that, while in this life, we do not remember any single event that happened to us in previous lives?” ...If you forget this birth, and concentrate on the other, then you can know. But, you seldom give up the attachment to this life! [(1-4-1965) S5 25:140]

And, whilst not mentioned in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, this is also a traditional belief, for—as Purohit Swāmi (1938:44) translates—*Yoga-Sūtra* 3:18 directs the practitioner to: ‘Concentrate on the impressions of the past; know past lives’ [*pūrva-jāti*].

Similarly, Parrinder notes that, whilst ordinary people are traditionally thought to be born and to act in accordance to the tendencies they have acquired as a result of their *karma* (actions) in past lives, this obviously cannot be the case for the avatar, who (as the *Bhagavad-Gītā* goes on to claim) does not accumulate any *karma* in the first place. But, whilst Sathya Sai Baba certainly sometimes echoes this claim¹⁸, at other times, for him—and in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (e.g. 4:14)—non-

¹⁶ Sathya Sai Baba (17-10-1961) S2 16:73 NB On other modern avatars, see Chapter 5 below (especially Section 5.4).

¹⁷ C XXI 65

¹⁸ See, e.g., Sathya Sai Baba (24-7-1983) S16 16:89.

accumulation of *karma* is an important ideal for ordinary persons to aspire to.

Likewise, whilst Parrinder concludes that Kṛṣṇa's incarnations 'are different from those of Arjuna, not only by knowledge but by purpose and his very nature', and whilst this may generally be the case in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (it is not unequivocally so¹⁹), this presents an explicit contradiction to some of Sathya Sai Baba's views. Sathya Sai Baba says, for example:

Raama and Krishna are regarded as *Avathaars*. This is not so. They are in their human form quite like other ordinary men. All of you are embodiments of the Divine. Recognise this fact and strengthen this feeling within you. The idea that God is different from you should be given up.²⁰

Again, this is a typical charismatic assertion, and Sathya Sai Baba's non-dualistic spiritual agenda is highlighted—this is a spiritualization of traditional views.

Parrinder (1970:225) further writes that:

It might be concluded that God and man are basically identical, and that when Arjuna's ignorance is dispelled he will realize that he is the same as God. ...but the *Gītā* never says that Arjuna is God. It toys with monistic phrases and in one verse even says that Krishna is Arjuna (Dhananjaya, 10, 37), which is logical if he is all beings, but the reverse is never stated. Not only the terrible transcendental Vision (ch.11), but also the many exhortations to devotion and emphasis on 'coming to Me' show that religiously the *Gītā* is not fully monistic, and that there is an abiding difference between God and man, and this is not merely a matter of the present limited knowledge of Arjuna.

But Sathya Sai Baba sometimes portrays the difference between the avatar and ordinary human beings as very much being just a matter of the present limited knowledge or 'awareness'²¹ of the latter—likening the ordinary person to a prince growing up in a den of robbers, unaware of his identity²². Again, the non-dualistic overtones of this are clear. Indeed, this last example parallels a traditional story of a prince brought up by a fowler that Śaṅkara sometimes cites²³.

Sathya Sai Baba's treatment of another of Parrinder's references above, Chapter 10 of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (connecting Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna), also provides a non-dualistic interpretation. In Chapter 10, as Parrinder (1970:39) puts it, Kṛṣṇa gives 'a long list of his presence in all great forms', and it is clear that hierarchical resemblance is to the fore in this—the forms thus described are the most prominent

¹⁹ E.g. *Bhagavad-Gītā* 7:18, "the man of wisdom is [my] very self".

²⁰ (28-3-1996) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume29/sss29-o8.pdf> [13-7-2007]

²¹ Sathya Sai Baba (23-11-1972) S11 50:323

²² (30-9-1960) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume01/sss01-32.pdf> [13-7-2007]

²³ See, e.g., Jaqueline Suthren Hirst (2005), p.82.

of their respective classes: ‘Vishnu of the solar spirits, Indra (Vāsava) of the gods, Śiva (Śankara) of the Rudras’ etc. Indeed, *Bhagavad-Gītā* 10:41 has Kṛṣṇa summarize these by aligning himself with: ‘Whatever being shows wide power, prosperity or strength’²⁴. But Sathya Sai Baba, in explicitly referring to this chapter of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, makes his own non-hierarchical non-dualistic interpretation plain:

know the infinity of forms which the Lord assumes. All forms are His. If one has faith that the lord is present in the atom, one will have a vision of the Lord even in the atom. But if you make a distinction between different objects, treat some as pure and others as impure²⁵, you will not get that vision.²⁶

And another verse towards the end of Chapter 10, *Bhagavad-Gītā* 10:39, does provide at least some encouragement for this type of interpretation, as Kṛṣṇa avers: ‘There can be no being, moving or unmoving, that exists without me’.

Similarly, the major theophany of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*—the ‘terrible transcendental Vision’ referred to by Parrinder—is sometimes presented by Sathya Sai Baba as being ‘immanent in man’²⁷, and there certainly is a monistic, if not explicitly non-dualistic, tinge to the original. *Bhagavad-Gītā* 11:16 refers to this as the ‘*viśvarūpa*’ (‘universal form’), and, as we saw Soifer note earlier (see p.152 above), it recalls ideas presented in the *Brāhmaṇas*, or even earlier—Parrinder (1970:41) writes:



Fig.19 The ‘Universal Form’—a popular depiction of the “*viśwa-virāṭ-swarūpam*” of Kṛṣṇa (who is standing at bottom-right) inspiring devotion in Arjuna (kneeling).

²⁴ Zaehner (1969), p.302

²⁵ Distinctions between “pure” and “impure” are foundational to many traditional Hindu practices—most obviously, the distinctions involved in the caste system.

²⁶ (27-2-1995) <http://sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume28/ss28-04.pdf> [14-6-2007]

²⁷ (24-3-1991) S24 6:56 NB Sathya Sai Baba speaks here of the ‘*Virata Swaroopa*’—cf. p.152 above and Fig.19 above.

all the gods are to be seen in the divine form.... The All-Lord and All-form has many arms, bellies, mouths and eyes, extending without beginning, middle or end [cf. Fig.19 above]. These recall the giant Purusha or Rig Veda 10, 90, and indicate the all-pervading greatness and the inclusiveness in one of all gods and attributes.

This is an inclusivistic “merging of the gods”, the like of which we encountered in the previous chapter, and, in this later (post-upaniṣadic) context, it certainly does have some monistic connotations. Kṛṣṇa is seen to constitute the entire world.

Nevertheless, even Sathya Sai Baba does not always speak of the *viśvarūpa* idea in monistic terms—he claims to have granted “visions” of this form to a few deserving devotees, and they speak of these (as does he himself) in terms that invoke a strong deity-devotee duality. Sai devotee M.L.Leela (1995:62) cites the *Bhagavad-Gītā* in this regard, even quoting verse 11:8 in which Kṛṣṇa gives Arjuna the ‘Divine eye’ in order to see his *viśvarūpa*—hardly a coherent act if the form were simply “immanent” in him, as Sathya Sai Baba would have it. Leela (1995:64-65) also emphasizes what strikes her as the immense size of this ‘Magnified Form... huge as the hillock’ and she includes an artistic impression of it on the cover of her book (Fig.20)—in which devotees are depicted so small as to be barely visible (above the red lotus at bottom). It is

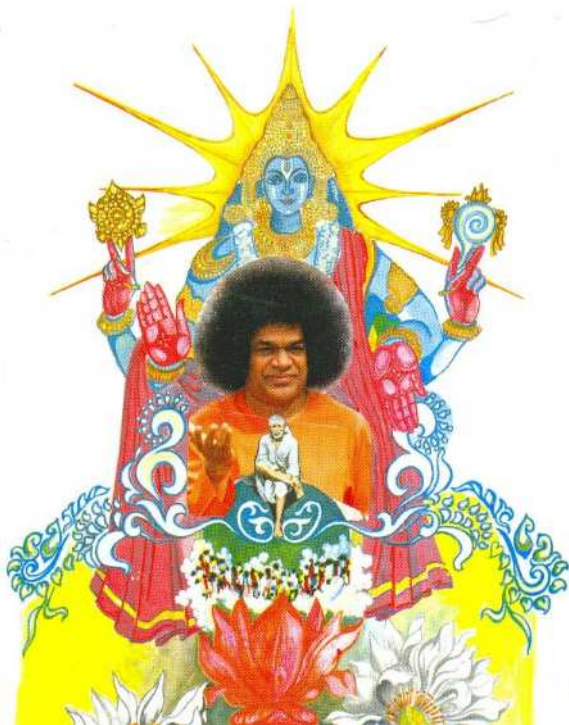


Fig.20 Sai Magnified—a Sathya Sai Baba devotee’s impression of the *viśvarūpa* (perhaps drawing upon popular representations of this figure—cf. Fig.19). Note Viṣṇu (discus, conch and sun behind head—cf. Fig.12b); and Shirdi Sai as the heart of Sathya Sai (cf. p.243,n.2).

hard to see how, in this depiction, the form in question can be considered to be immanent in the devotees. And Haraldsson (1997:259) notes the testimony of another devotee that Sathya Sai Baba—upon being questioned by devotees as to the veracity of a claim to have showed them the *viśvarūpa*—replied that they would:

have been unable to tolerate even one-third of the vision seen by Arjuna; some people had already fainted.... Arjuna had had the spiritual power to have that vision fully, whereas they had not.

The implication, again, is that the vision is something granted or withheld by the deity—something external to, and beyond the control of the devotee.

There is, then, something of a paradox here. And, the ideal of devotion (which, in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, as Parrinder (1970:42) notes, the *viśvarūpa* certainly inspires²⁸), whilst being another factor cited by Parrinder as evidence of the ‘abiding difference’ between the avatar and ordinary persons, similarly presents a paradox in this regard. In *Bhagavad-Gītā* 9:4, Kṛṣṇa avers: “All beings abide in me, and I do not abide in them”, yet, in verse 29 of the same chapter, says: “But those who worship me with devotion, they are in me and I am also in them”. And Sathya Sai Baba presents a variant upon this paradox:

Some may ask, “While you are God why worship God?” Even as you realise you are Divine, you have to do certain things as part of your duty.... When you practise this, it becomes easier to realise God.²⁹

In both of these cases, devotion does not—as Parrinder would have it—necessarily entail an ‘abiding difference’ between the human and divine.

This last passage, furthermore, recalls some of the sentiments quoted by Gerson earlier (p.94) that Sathya Sai Baba shares with Śaṅkara, and Gerson (1998:78) further quotes Sathya Sai Baba in this connection as follows:

You have to outgrow the idol, picture and image; they are the kindergarten materials in spiritual schools; seek to know the Divine Energy... Rise higher into the empyrean heights of the Pure Attributeless Transcendent One.

Similarly, for Śaṅkara, as Parrinder (1970:53) writes:

Worship and good works are for spiritual beginners, and are temporary. The essential is ‘knowledge’... The knowledge is of the truth, of the eternal nature of the soul and its identification with the divine.

There is thus no real paradox here—merely different stages of spiritual progress, for which different understandings are seen as being appropriate, and this perhaps goes some way towards explaining some of the other “paradoxes” or “inconsistencies” that we have seen. Major differences are posited between the avatar and ordinary mortals to serve the purpose of fostering devotion, but must sometimes be minimized or nullified so as to reaffirm what, for Sathya Sai Baba, as for Śaṅkara, is an ultimately non-dualistic world-view—or, in the case of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, to affirm that devotion leads to the highest possible state, mergence with the deity.

In accordance with this, Lindtner (1995:201) writes of the philosophical milieu of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* that: ‘The idea that the same teacher can deliver different teachings to different people at different times is indeed a *locus communis*’. And

²⁸ NB This is evident in the accounts of Sathya Sai Baba’s devotees also (Leela, cf. ASN 59-60).

²⁹ Sathya Sai Baba (19-7-1997) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/d970719.html> [13-7-2007]

Sathya Sai Baba's views can be seen to be incontinuity with this—he says:

apparent contradictions are not contradictions. The teaching varies according to the state of spiritual development of the person concerned and the situation in which he is placed³⁰. The inner significance of the great teachings of the *avatars* and sages should be properly understood before any criticism is attempted.³¹

Traditional authority is maintained here—it is merely the “inner significance” of tradition that Sathya Sai Baba suggests his followers may be misinterpreting—but, as we have seen, and will further see, Sathya Sai Baba, and even the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, do contribute much in the way of novel interpretations of tradition.

The fact of their doing so is itself conducive to producing “paradoxes”—indeed, as Parrinder (1970:119,36) notes, *Bhagavad-Gītā* 4:6 sometimes displays ‘an intentionally paradoxical character’: ‘Although Krishna is unborn, although his self is eternal (*avyayātmā*), yet by means of his own mysterious power (*māyā*) he comes into being’. One of the key terms here is *māyā*, a term we encountered earlier as the “power” behind Indra’s ‘multiform’ nature, and Parrinder observes that the connotations of this term (in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and earlier contexts—in contrast to its later sense of “illusion”) indicate that the avatar, “though unborn” really *was* believed to “come into being”, thus implying a “real” paradox. Gonda (1965:167-168), however, writes that:

this term is often employed in connection with the marvels of nature.... Those possessed of *māyā*, e.g. gods, could moreover attain results which are beyond the power of ordinary men. ...the surprising and incredible may easily be taken to be unreal or impossible, that is to say: not in accordance with what is from a certain point of view called or regarded as reality.

So, whilst the avatar may be paradoxical from an “ordinary point of view”, this is not the full story. As Zaehner (1969:183) notes, in the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (4:10)—a work presenting many parallels to the *Bhagavad-Gītā*—‘*Māyā* is material Nature (*prakṛti*)’, and the “ordinary point of view” just mentioned, is most likely a derivative of Sāṃkhya philosophy—in which, as we saw earlier, *prakṛti* is opposed to *puruṣa* (as “spirit”). Zaehner (1969:366) notes that the ‘total incompatibility of the two is the basis of the whole [Sāṃkhya] system’, but *Bhagavad-Gītā* 15:17-18 identifies Kṛṣṇa with an *uttamaḥ puruṣa*, a “supreme spirit”—transcendent to

³⁰ NB Halbfass (1988:358) notes that this type of view is common in modern Indian “presentations of Indian philosophy”—citing the idea of “consideration of the different levels of qualification (*adhikārabheda*) of disciples”. Sarkar (1997:325) sees the emergence of this concept as a ‘formal doctrine in the seventeenth-eighteenth century’ and connects it with Neo-Hindu inclusivism, but, as is evident here, and as we will especially see in Section 4.4, its roots are much older than this.

³¹ Sathya Sai Baba (1988) S21 17:141

Sāṃkhya(-like) matter-spirit dualism—a spirit which: ‘passes not away’ (*avyaya*); ‘enters-and-pervades’ (*āviśya*) the ‘three worlds’, ‘sustaining them’³². Thus defined (recalling the attributes of Viṣṇu outlined earlier)—coming into being as *prakṛti*, while simultaneously remaining transcendent as the (Sāṃkhya-like) *puruṣa*—Kṛṣṇa’s avatar role is not really paradoxical.

As an important “side-effect” of this understanding, avatars—as we saw Parrinder note earlier (p.182 above)—become an ideal means for effecting a synthesis of abstract theological ideas and more concrete mythological figures. Matchett (2001:8) writes that:

It is important to distinguish between the individual stories [tortoise, dwarf etc.] which have been incorporated [as avatar accounts] ...and the *avatāra* myth itself. Some of the former are primal myths which express basic insights into the nature of the world and into the human condition. The latter is a secondary myth, doctrinal or ideological in character and purpose, which has been imposed upon the former in order to give them a common frame of reference and a particular theological character which they did not originally possess. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to speak of the *avatāra* doctrine rather than the *avatāra* myth, but ‘doctrine’ suggests something which could be part of a system or an argument rather than something presented... in narrative form.

However, there certainly are doctrinal elements to the avatar-like ideas expressed in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (Matchett is mostly referring to the *Purāṇas*)—to the extent that this work occasionally sees fit to directly question some of the finer points of the logic of some of the earlier ideas that it seeks to include.

Parrinder (1970:46) notes that, in quoting an upaniṣadic passage, it seems to modify the wording so as to avoid a potential conflict with the concept of avatars:

The Kaṭha Upanishad is quoted which says of the soul that it has not come from anywhere, ‘has not become anyone’ (*na babhūva kaścit*). ...the Gītā, in quoting this verse, changes the words to alter the whole sense by saying that the soul having come to be ‘nor will evermore come not to be’ (*vā na bhūyah*). This emendation averts any denial of the incarnation, of God or soul.³³

Doctrine is thus upheld here, and it is also significant to note that, whilst the *Bhagavad-Gītā* presents its teachings as being thoroughly traditional—taught to ancient sages from time immemorial (as we saw above, p.193), changes are being made which ‘alter the whole sense’ of traditional ideas.

The same, as we have seen (e.g. p.73), can be said of some of Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings. This is again a type of inclusivism, and an obvious case of “synthesis”

³² Zaehner (1969), p.367-368.

³³ Cf. Zaehner (1969), p.132. The verses here are *Kāthopaniṣad* 2:18 and *Bhagavad-Gītā* 2:20.

(the key term that we noted at the beginning of this section). But Sathya Sai Baba is not always content with such inclusivism, and is generally far less subtle in “altering the whole sense” of traditional ideas. Indeed, despite the general accordance between his views and those of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, he even goes so far as to reject the basic sense of the key verses describing the avatar (cited p.195). In this, he appeals to rational authority—using it to support a charismatic assertion—as he says that the conditions of the current age preclude his protecting the virtuous or killing the wicked, for ‘there will not be even one wholly righteous person’³⁴. Rather, he says: ‘In this *Avathaar*, the wicked will not be destroyed; they will be corrected and reformed and educated and led back to the path from which they have strayed’³⁵. This is a thoroughly modernist manifesto, but one that (apart from its connection to “the avatar”) is not unique to Sathya Sai Baba. As we will see, such sentiments resonate with the concerns of many “Neo-Hindu” organisations and thinkers—it may simply be that Sathya Sai Baba has adopted this emphasis from the modern milieu in which he is operating. Notably, his statement, cited earlier (p.73), that there is ‘no such thing as God “descending” on earth or leaving it’ similarly accords with some Neo-Hindu views (see p.301).

And, of course, his views do often accord in a fairly straightforward manner with traditional views. For example, he gives various traditional symptoms of what he perceives as a decline in *dharma* that has necessitated his coming as avatar in the present age (*yuga*). He says: ‘conceit has grown so wild that men have become foolish enough to ask, “What and where is God?” Truth is condemned as a trap; justice is jeered at’³⁶; ‘Man has no purity in the heart, no sanctity in his emotions, no love in his deeds, no God in his prayers’³⁷; ‘the brute in him overwhelms the human’³⁸. All of this might be compared to *Bhagavad-Gītā* 16:7-8,15:

Of creative action and its return to rest the devilish folk know nothing; in them there is no purity, no morality, no truth... ‘The world is devoid of truth,’ they say, ‘it has no ground, no ruling Lord...’ ...they offer sacrifices that are but sacrifice in name and not in the way prescribed,—the hypocrites!³⁹

In another instance, Sathya Sai Baba says:

People tell Me that mankind is on the brink of destruction, that the forces of hypoc-

³⁴ (28-8-1994) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume27/sss27-23.pdf> [16-5-2007]

³⁵ Sathya Sai Baba (2-1955) S1 2:16

³⁶ (18-8-1968) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume08/sss08-28.pdf> [12-7-2007]

³⁷ (31-8-1972) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume11/sss11-45.pdf> [12-7-2007]

³⁸ (14-6-1983) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume16/sss16-21.pdf> [12-7-2007]

³⁹ Zaehner (1969), pp.371-372.

risiness and hate are prevailing fast in all the continents, and that anxiety and fear are stalking the streets of every city and village of the world; there is no need to tell Me this, for, I have come precisely for this very reason [(13-8-1971) S11 31:207].

This, and indeed all of the above, very much embody the basic sentiments, and even perhaps echo some of the specific details, of traditional descriptions of the *Kali Yuga* (Dark Age) in which we are popularly held to be living.

The *Bhagavad-Gītā* does not specifically mention the *Kali Yuga*, but it certainly influenced later traditions that expand upon its many “evils”—*Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 12:3.31,32,39 says, for example:

As a result of Kali’s influence... Countries will be ravaged by robbers and miscreants.... People will have their minds weighed down with constant anxiety and fear... people will fight, throwing to the winds all friendliness and goodwill....⁴⁰

Sarkar (1997:306-307) sees the *Kaliyuga* as ‘a recurrent and powerful dystopia, a format for voicing a variety of high-caste male anxieties’, but, as is evident from all of the above, its appeal is more general than this.

Even more importantly, it holds promise for the future—for, although the *Kali* age is the fourth and final in the cycle of ages, and the age in which *dharma* is at its nadir, it is traditionally believed to be followed by a new ‘Golden Age’, as the cycle of *yugas* repeats itself. Sathya Sai Baba especially picks up upon this tradition—he says that his task is to make ‘the *Kali yuga* (present Iron age), a *Kritha yuga* (past Golden age)’ by means of ‘the spread of the knowledge and practice of *Dharma*’⁴¹. And he proffers his avatar persona as a guarantor of this:

Many hesitate to believe that things will improve, that life for all will be happy and full of joy, that the Golden Age will ever recur. Let me assure you that this *Dharma-swarūpa* (Righteousness personified [i.e. himself]) has not come in vain.⁴²

Svarūpa, as we saw earlier, is a rough synonym of “avatar”, and, as Gonda (1969:3) notes, the term ‘*Dharma* incarnate’ is especially applied to kings; indeed, it is a prominent description of the most stereotypically kingly of avatars—*Rāma*⁴³.

This, then, is another instance of inclusivism on Sathya Sai Baba’s part, but, as we have seen, he does not always follow this ethic, and, to give another example of this, he sometimes even goes so far as to refute the traditional theory of the decline of *dharma* in each successive *yuga*:

⁴⁰ Tagare (1978), Part V, pp.2140-2141

⁴¹ Sathya Sai Baba (10-10-1964) S4 31:184,185

⁴² Sathya Sai Baba (3-3-1965) S5 11:70

⁴³ Cf. Whaling (1980), pp.39ff. Sathya Sai Baba often cites *Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa* 3:35.113 ‘*Ramo Vighrahavaan Dharmah*... Rama is the very embodiment of righteousness’ [(26-3-1988) S21 10:83].

Some Pandiths explain the Geetha verse, which declares that God incarnates when *Dharma* (virtue) declines, in this way: “*Dharma* stood on four legs in the *Kritha* (golden or fulfilled) Age; it had only three in the next age, the *Thretha*; (three legged) later, in the *Dhwaapara* (twin based) Age, it stood precariously on two and now in the *Kali* (iron or harsh) Age, it has only one leg to stand on!” They say also in the same breath, that God incarnated as Raama in the *Thretha* Age, and as Krishna in the *Dhwaapara* Age, with the avowed purpose of restoring *Dharma*! According to them, when Krishna incarnated *Dharma* had two legs, but, when His human career was closed, *Dharma* lost one more leg and had to survive in agony, having only one solitary leg! Can such absurdity be ever believed? No. The Incarnations of God have always fulfilled their tasks. *Dharma* has always been restored, in full.⁴⁴

Elsewhere, he points out a problem in the very idea that *dharma*—being a divine, and hence (of theological necessity) unchanging entity—declines in the first place. He distinguishes between *dharma* and ‘the practice of *dharma*’ in this regard⁴⁵, or describes *dharma* as becoming ‘obscure’, requiring merely that the avatar should make it ‘more manifest’⁴⁶, but this is something of a traditional view—Robert Lingat (1962:14) summarizes, as follows, some traditional commentaries on the *Mānava-Dharma-Śāstra* [wherein the idea of the “dharma-bull” first occurs]:

The dharma through its atemporal nature, is immune to the changes of the ages. The norms it propounds are valid for all time. ...When Manu declares that the Dharma bull has lost, in the course of time, three of its feet, his statement must be taken as meaning that the dharma needs to be upheld....

Nevertheless, Sathya Sai Baba clearly views himself as innovating—he elsewhere says in this connection of the traditional idea that *dharma* declines: ‘this statement may cause some misgiving’⁴⁷—i.e. “It may be understood by this..., but I say unto you...”; or, in the previous case: “Some Pandits say..., but I say unto you...”. He does not cite any traditional authority to bolster his charismatic assertions here,

⁴⁴ Sathya Sai Baba (29-7-1969) S9 14:72 NB The problematic nature of this theory is noted by Aurobindo—who, however, attempts to solve it by de-emphasizing the centrality of *dharma* to the avatar’s mission (see, e.g., R.K.Pandey (1979), p.48). Modern academics too have noted this problem (e.g.: Brockington (1998), p.289; Kosambi (2002), p.379), but their solutions are of a different order. Soifer, (1991:146ff.) invokes parallels between the avatars and the great dissolutions (*mahā-pralaya*) of the *kalpa* system (see p.340)—parallels she says also explain the related paradox of the fact that ‘the frequency of the appearance of avatāras per yuga is in inverse proportion to the amount of adharma present’. Soifer (1976:144) writes: ‘while one is at first surprised to see the number of avatāras declining as adharma is rising, the case is actually that one avatāra descends for every 1200 years’, and Bassuk (1987b:17) too explains this disparity by pointing out that the number of avatars in each *yuga* is proportional to the length of the *yuga*. But this is problematic—the lengths of *yugas* and numbers of avatars are variously reported by different traditional authorities.

⁴⁵ Sathya Sai Baba (21-06-1979) S14 26:154

⁴⁶ (28-4-1999) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume32/sss32p1-13.pdf> [12-7-2007]

⁴⁷ B 53

but simply appeals to rational authority—and it is entirely possible that he has independently happened upon such lines of reasoning.

And he certainly makes some statements for which I could find no traditional precedent. *Bhagavad-Gītā* 9:11-12 avers that not all will recognise the avatar to be the supreme divinity, dismissing such as “fools” of “ogriish”, “demonic” and “delusive” nature—having Kṛṣṇa say: “Fools despise me”. But Sathya Sai Baba (sometimes) claims to be happy with criticism, arguing that it serves ‘to promote the greatness of the *Avathaar* and not to tarnish it’⁴⁸—i.e. “any publicity is good publicity” (as the modern proverb goes). He further says that, at the very least, he is happy with defamation because those responsible for it ‘derive joy therefrom’⁴⁹, and portrays such criticism as inevitable—for ‘Avatars must do many things maybe not be liked by some’⁵⁰. He makes absolutely no appeal to tradition here—he simply exercises charismatic and rational authority.

Even in this, however, he very much abides by the spirit of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, and, interestingly, there is a distant parallel to be seen between what we saw earlier to be his bardic caste background and the milieu within which this ancient work was likely produced. “*Gītā*” means “song”⁵¹, and, albeit that this song is attributed to “God” (*Bhagavān*) and that it is perhaps atypical of the *Mahābhārata* narrative, the context in which it is delivered is in consonance with its form, for it casts Kṛṣṇa—into whose mouth most of it is put—in the traditional role of *sūta* (bard)⁵². Brockington (1998:19,177) writes: ‘It is known that these bards accompanied their masters into battle or the hunt as charioteers’ (*sārathi*), and suggests that they had ‘considerable prestige and standing’, as is witnessed by Kṛṣṇa (and other respected figures) taking on this role in the *Mahābhārata*.

The immediate frame-story of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* has it being narrated to the blind king Dhṛtarāṣṭra by his charioteer Saṁjaya, and, famously, it is in a similar role, within this narration, that Kṛṣṇa relates the *Bhagavad-Gītā* to Arjuna. Images of this latter narration abound in Vaiṣṇava iconography to this day (Fig.21a), and Sathya Sai Baba’s cult is typical in this regard (Fig.21b). Furthermore, as Bowen (1985:160) notes:

⁴⁸ (15-8-1993) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume26/sss26-28.pdf> [12-7-2007]

⁴⁹ Sathya Sai Baba (28-4-1975) S13 12:69

⁵⁰ Sathya Sai Baba, *Sai Echoes from the Kodai Hills* 1998 (Prashanthi Nilayam, SSSBPT, 1998), ch.11, p.109 (as paraphrased at <http://home.no.net/anir/Sai/NDX.html>).

⁵¹ See Gonda (1977:271ff.) on *gītā* as a genre. Gonda (1977:271) writes that ‘the term may, at least originally, have been applied to texts which were not recited in the ordinary way, but chanted’.

⁵² NB On the *Sūtas*, see Ludo Rocher (1980), pp.53-56.

The title of the monthly magazine published from Prashanti Nilayam perpetually reaffirms Baba's claimed identity with Krishna: *Sanathana Sarathi*, 'the Eternal Charioteer', a reference to Krishna's classic role in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Moreover, Brockington (1998:20) writes that the *sūtas* are 'distant predecessors of the modern Bhat', and it is with these latter figures—as we saw earlier—that Sathya Sai Baba's caste affiliation lies. Further to what we have seen of the high status of such figures, Rocher (1980:58) writes:

Socially the *bhāt* occupies a very strong position. ...he stands "higher in public estimation than the Brahmins." ...Clearly people are in awe of the *bhāt*. He carries an aura of sacredness and immunity that makes himself and anything around him invulnerable and inalienable.

This certainly resonates with what we have seen of devotees' impressions of Sathya Sai Baba.

Interestingly, Fig.21b also seems to suggest that, for his devotees, Sathya Sai Baba replaces both Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, combining within himself the roles of *sūta* and king⁵³, and, even traditionally, there was an overlap in this regard. Hank Heifetz and Velcheru Narayana Rao (1987:151-152) write that:

The symbols of status held by the court poet reflected the symbols of the king. He had the right to be carried on a palanquin, have an umbrella held above his head, and wear pearl necklaces and gold-embroidered clothes.... He was, in a sense, the king's alter ego.

Given what we saw earlier of the (divine) 'status of the king', the role and identity of his bard was surely a significant one, and, again, one that may have contributed—perhaps even subconsciously—to Sathya Sai Baba's divine persona.

Heifetz and Rao (1987:132) note that 'the first mode of relationship between the poet and his king, [is] that of guru and disciple', and we noted above the role of *guru* to be one traditionally played by Sathya Sai Baba's caste, the Bhaṭṛājus. Certainly, as Padmanaban (2000:245) writes, early in Sathya Sai Baba's career 'many ...royal families became Baba's devotees', and Haraldsson (1997:94) quotes



Fig.21a Into Battle—an ISKCON ("Hare Krishna") devotee's impression of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna.



Fig.21b The Eternal Charioteer: a Sathya Sai Baba devotee substitutes Sai (cp. Fig.13) for both Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna (cp. Fig.21a).

⁵³ NB The role of Arjuna is conspicuously absent from Sathya Sai Baba's autohagiological discourse, although some devotees have from time to time seen Kasturi in this light.

the head of one of these families, the Raja of Venkatagiri, as follows:

Our class has been virtually destroyed, by political, social and economic changes in this country. If our family is one of the few holding on to the older traditions, it is entirely because of Swami, because he wants these traditions to go on. He is the custodian of Dharma. He is Rama Himself.

Royal tradition and Sathya Sai Baba’s *guru* and avatar personae are thus obviously intertwined (in the perception of the Raja at least). And Haraldsson (1997:180-182) later notes the testimony of an ex-devotee—one of Sathya Sai Baba’s former personal attendants—that recalls the above-described overlap between the lifestyles of kings and their poets:

[The ex-devotee told Haraldsson that:] The swami would always have some attendant around to do everything for him, even to carry his handkerchief, ...someone would bring him his clothes and ...he did not even dress himself.

[The ex-devotee says:]...It is like with a raja. If you go to the Raja of Venkatagiri, I expect you will see his servants standing there ready with his clothes when he comes out of the bathroom in the morning.

Of course, Sathya Sai Baba’s usual attire is far less elaborate than that of a Raja, but the overlap is present nonetheless, and at least provides us with another angle from which to consider Sathya Sai Baba’s regal aura (cf. Section 3.1 above).

We have seen in this section that the spirit (if not the letter) of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* pervades Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar persona, and, in this chapter as a whole, we have seen that this persona exhibits continuities with many other ancient traditional sources—albeit often in spiritualized, ethicized, or interiorized form. This pattern, we will see to continue in the next chapter, as I progress to consider traditions that I have labelled as “medieval”. There is no firm dividing line between these traditions and those that I have treated in this chapter. Indeed, I have already cited some of their number, and we will encounter again also some of the ancient works that I have introduced in this chapter. As discussed at the end of Section 2.3, however, I believe that it is structurally useful, and conventionally acceptable, for me to draw a rough chronological dividing line here.

4. MEDIEVAL MANIFESTATIONS

You must see, hear, study, observe, experience, reflect; then only can you understand Me. You will learn then that I am *prema* [love] itself; that I give only one thing, *Aanandha* [bliss], through the *prema*. My task is to distribute solace, courage and *shaanthi* [peace]. That is to say, My characteristics are the ancient authentic ones; only the Manifested Form is new.¹

I cited earlier (p.48), a passage in which Sathya Sai Baba invoked the long history of avatar traditions in the service of legitimating his divine persona, and his statement here is a similar case. Again, Sathya Sai Baba pleads for doubters not to dismiss his divinity without a thorough investigation of it, and he does so for similar reasons: he explicitly equates authenticity with antiquity, that is to say with traditional authority (in Weber's terms), and he implicitly draws a distinction between his apparent form and his (true) 'characteristics'—implying that the latter are identical with those of 'ancient' avatars. As we have also already seen and will further see, Sathya Sai Baba does indeed invoke many "characteristics" (including those listed here) that echo various phases of the historical development of the avatar traditions. I have opted to term the phase that I will consider in this chapter "medieval"—a term which I do not hold to have any intrinsic relationship to the material in question, but which does conveniently demarcate the "middle ages" between the "ancient" and distinctively "modern" periods of Indian history (i.e. c. 500 CE to c. 1800 CE, see p.126 above).

In the first section of this chapter, I will consider the Purāṇas (c.300 CE – c.1300 CE). Albeit that their name means something like "ancient" tales, these works are later compositions than the epics, mostly fitting into the medieval section of my periodization. As we will see, the Purāṇas especially expand upon aspects of the *Mahābhārata* (especially the *Harivaṃśa*, a "supplement" to this work), and upon the *Rāmāyaṇa*², but in some cases also invoke traditions from the Vedas and Upaniṣads. Moreover, some of them much develop the mythology of Śiva—something of the import of which to Sathya Sai Baba's divine persona we have already seen. It is in the Purāṇas that we first encounter the Sanskrit term *avatāra*—Couture (2001:314) notes that 'The *Brahma-Purāṇa*... and *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa*... appear to be the first texts to have regularly used the term', and these works date to perhaps the 3rd or 4th centuries CE. This did not, however, much curtail the variety that we have seen in the details of particular avatar tales—in fact, as the

¹ Sathya Sai Baba, S2 31:165-166 (4-3-1962)

² On the relationship of the Purāṇas to the earlier epics see Brockington (1998), pp.491ff.

number of Purāṇas proliferated, so did this variety. There is more detail in these works than can be adequately described in any one study³; I can at best touch upon a few points that seem relevant to understanding Sathya Sai Baba's ideas.

In the second section of this chapter, I will investigate a number of references that Sathya Sai Baba makes to medieval avatar typologies and to some traditional “technical” traits of the avatars. In this regard, and as we also saw in Section 3.3 above, it is noteworthy that Sathya Sai Baba often seems to attempt to imbue his avatar statements with traditional and rational authority via such enumerated categories—these are not logically consistent analyses of the avatar idea, but they give the impression of being so and engender authority thereby.

As we have seen, Sathya Sai Baba also tends to favour monistic or non-dualistic strands of traditional thought, and these strands were especially systematized by the medieval “Advaita” (“Non-Dualist”) school of interpretation, of which Śaṅkara is the most famous exponent. I will thus, in the third section of this chapter (and indeed at various stages throughout this chapter), consider the relationship between the ideas of this school (and especially of Śaṅkara) and Sathya Sai Baba's (avatar) views, further pondering potential connections between both of these and avatar ideas in general. In the process, I will contrast Sathya Sai Baba ideas with those of some of the other major medieval philosophical schools—it will quickly become clear that, as we might expect from what we have seen, Sathya Sai Baba's teachings accord much more with non-dualism than with other views.

It is noteworthy, however, that many of the major figures in these schools were themselves cast by their followers as avatars—indeed, this is the rule, rather than the exception. In this we first witness the transference of the avatar status onto persons who we may safely regard as historical individuals—although the fact that this mostly occurred well after the passing of the figures in question makes this less of a major step than we might otherwise think it to be. Those figures to whom I will refer here (and elsewhere) are: Śaṅkara (c.8th century CE)—considered to be an avatar of Śiva; Rāmānuja (11th century CE)—an avatar of Rāma; Nimbārka (12th century CE)—regarded as a ‘descent of the *Sudarśana Cakra* or discus of Kṛṣṇa’; Madhva (13th century CE)—an avatar of Vāyu; Vallabha (1479-1531) ‘the descent of the face of Kṛṣṇa’; Kavirāja Gosvāmī (15th century CE), author of the *Caitanya-Caritāmṛta* (the most popular hagiography of Caitanya (1486-1533)—

³ For more on avatar ideas in the Purāṇas see: Soifer (1991), who presents a comprehensive monograph on the Narasiṃha and Vāmana avatars; and Matchett (2001), who presents a full-length study of Kṛṣṇa as an avatar in three of the major Purāṇas.

who was regarded as an ‘*avatāra* of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā’, and of whom I will have much more to say in subsequent chapters); and Jīva Goswāmī (16th century CE), another prominent follower of Caitanya—the two Goswāmī’s both being regarded as avatars of minor *gopīs* (milkmaids associated with Kṛṣṇa)⁴. As I noted earlier, it is also relevant that most of these figures are portrayed as avatars “of” some partial aspect of the deity—perhaps only Śaṅkara and Caitanya were considered to be “the avatar”, and they were by no means self-proclaimed avatars like Sathya Sai Baba⁵. I will have more to say about this at a later stage (see pp.343ff.).

In the fourth section of this chapter, I will focus upon the theme of “inclusivism”, which we will see to be especially prominent in the context of this chapter. We encountered it in the previous chapter, and will have cause to revisit it again in Chapter 5 below, but we will see here that it has a special relationship to *advaita*, and that it is highlighted by contrasts between an emerging “Hindu” identity and “non-Hindu” religious traditions. In this last connection, I will also very briefly consider the influence that some of these non-Hindu religions might have had upon ideas of the avatar in general.

One potential area of influence suggested by some scholars is in the rise of devotionalism in Indian religious traditions, but Parrinder (1970:92) writes that: ‘Early and medieval Indian movements of devotion and love to God arose naturally from the Epics, the Gītā, and the Purāṇas’, and we have already seen something of this. Whatever the precise origins of these movements, the sentiments that they promoted came to occupy an increasingly prominent position, and I will focus upon these in the fifth section of this chapter. As we will see, they were likely also very influential in Sathya Sai Baba’s early religious career, and, especially some of the “ecstatic” states and traits that evolved from them, find many parallels in his persona. Finally, it is noteworthy that such devotional traditions were especially strong in medieval South India, and, as we will see in the sixth section of this chapter, a number of other themes in medieval South Indian history also present potential continuities with aspects of Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar persona.

⁴ I draw in the above on Sheth (2002:100), who I quote, and Parrinder (1970), pp.50-59,80-86.

⁵ See, e.g., Hacker (1995:27-28), who states that Śaṅkara’s divine identity is ‘obviously nothing more than a product of fantasy, rooted in the name Śaṅkara’, and H. Daniel Smith (1978:49), who notes: “Śaṅkara’ is an epithet for Śiva. ...[but] it is likely that this late 8th century mortal received his name, according to Malabar custom, to indicate the constellation under which he was born’.

4.1 Proliferating Purāṇic Parables

The *Puraanas* (mythological stories) always deal in parables. Each tale has a deeper meaning, something that is more valuable and useful than what appears on the surface. This meaning is to be practised in daily life; they are not stories told to while away the time.¹

We saw earlier some instances of Sathya Sai Baba giving ethicized or spiritualized interpretations to some of the traditional avatar stories, and I have already referred in this connection to the Purāṇas (see p.190). As the quotation here shows, he sees such interpretations as being of the utmost importance to these works, and this viewpoint is sometimes paralleled by the Purāṇas themselves. Parrinder (1970:72) writes that the Purāṇas can be characterized as works ‘serving particular didactic purposes’, and Matchett (2001:161) paraphrases a passage from *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 1:8 that illustrates this particularly well —noting that: ‘Each verse appears to represent a deeper level of understanding’.

For some, Kṛṣṇa is simply a hero whose deeds increase the fame of his race and his associates.... For others, his heroic deeds have a stronger mythological significance: they are intended to benefit the world and to destroy the enemies with whom the gods are in perpetual conflict.... Others again see his acts as rescuing the earth from the burden which is destroying it [i.e. *bhārāvataṛaṇa*].... Finally, there are those for whom Kṛṣṇa’s story is something to be heard and reflected upon with a view to lessening the suffering caused by one’s ignorance, desires and actions.

I also cited earlier (p.190) an allegorical passage from the “*Harivaṁśa*”, and I will further refer to this important work hereunder.

In fact, as Brockington (1998:313-14) observes, the *Harivaṁśa* (c.300 CE), the “Lineage of Hari (Kṛṣṇa)”, a ‘supplement’ to the *Mahābhārata*, is referred to by this latter work as a “Purāṇa”, and, if nothing else, it can be seen as a bridge between this work and some of the later Purāṇas. The general trajectory of development between and within these works towards allegorical interpretations of the type just mentioned is also clear in this connection. Matchett (2001:146) contrasts the ‘realism’ of the *Harivaṁśa* with the fact that the *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa*:

‘pietizes’ Kṛṣṇa’s adventures: by introducing the prayers and eulogies which are one of its chief characteristics, it directs the attention of the hearer/reader away from human events to focus upon Kṛṣṇa’s revelation of the Supreme God.

And Brockington (1998:318) notes a suggestion that, within the *Harivaṁśa* itself, ‘the Purāṇic elements... are clearly inessential and merely form a framework to an extensive epic poem on the deeds of Kṛṣṇa and his descendents’.

Brockington (1998:342) writes that:

¹ (28-12-1960) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume01/sss01-35.pdf> [21-6-2007]

The *Harivaṃśa*... provides evidence for the development of the *avatāra* concept, to amplify and continue from that found in the *Mahābhārata*. As a further development from the lists of four and six occurring in the *Nārāyaṇīya*, the *Harivaṃśa* contains a list of nine *prādurbhāvas*.

Enumerations of this kind fostered an inclusivistic absorption into the avatar mythology of various figures previously unrelated to it. Brockington (1998:343) notes that Dattātreya, whose relevance to Sathya Sai Baba we saw earlier, is one such figure so presented in the *Harivaṃśa*, and Matchett (2001:8) writes:

ten of Viṣṇu's *avatāras* came to be regarded as his major appearances: Matsya (the fish), Kurma (the tortoise), Varāha (the boar), Narasiṃha (the man-lion), Vāmana (the dwarf), Paraśurāma (Rāma with the axe), Rāma (the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa*), either Kṛṣṇa or his brother Balarāma (also known as Saṃkarṣaṇa), the Buddha, and Kalki (a figure yet to appear who will one day cleanse the world of all evil and fit it for a new beginning).

On top of the connections to Viṣṇu that we saw earlier of some of these figures, Günther-Dietz Sontheimer (1994:130) characterizes 'fish, tortoise, and boar' as '*par excellence* animals of the forest and the tribals', and suggests that:

The *daśāvatāras* ["ten Avatars"]... imply the gradual movement [of "Hindus"] from the *vana* [forest ("slash-and-burn shifting cultivation")] to the *kṣetra* [field (settled agricultural life)]. The reasons and functions of Paraśurāma, Rāma and Kṛṣṇa are more intelligible in the context of the requirements of the *kṣetra*, e.g. saving the Brahmins from the flood of the Kṣatriyas (Paraśurāma), upholding *dharma* (Rāma), protecting or tending cattle and ploughing (Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma).

This is perhaps further testimony that Axial Age societal changes likely contributed to the 'classic expression' of avatar ideas (cf. pp.127,178 above).

The *daśāvatāras*, as a group, became prominent in mythology, theology and iconography. The same adorn the pillars and walls of the interior of Sathya Sai Baba's temple in Prashanti Nilayam, and indeed Sathya Sai Baba is reported to have occasionally directly aligned himself with them—usually by way of granting "visions" to devotees. One of these devotees, as Padmanaban (2000:157) writes, claimed to have been shown 'successively all the *Dasavatargas* on His chest'². And Padmanaban (2000:441-445) notes what can be seen as a continuation of this type of "vision" into even wider inclusivistic territory. He tells a story that, in order to convert a Muslim 'who did not believe in Baba', Sathya Sai Baba showed 'His chest', where "Allah Ho Akbar" ["Allah is Great!"] was written in golden letters of the Urdū language' [i.e. Arabic script]. Certainly, for some of his devotees, the sa-

² NB The significance of this particular anatomical area presumably derives from its association with the "heart", the implication being that these figures are somehow in Sathya Sai Baba's "heart", that he encompasses (and supersedes) them (cf. Fig.17 & Fig.20 above).

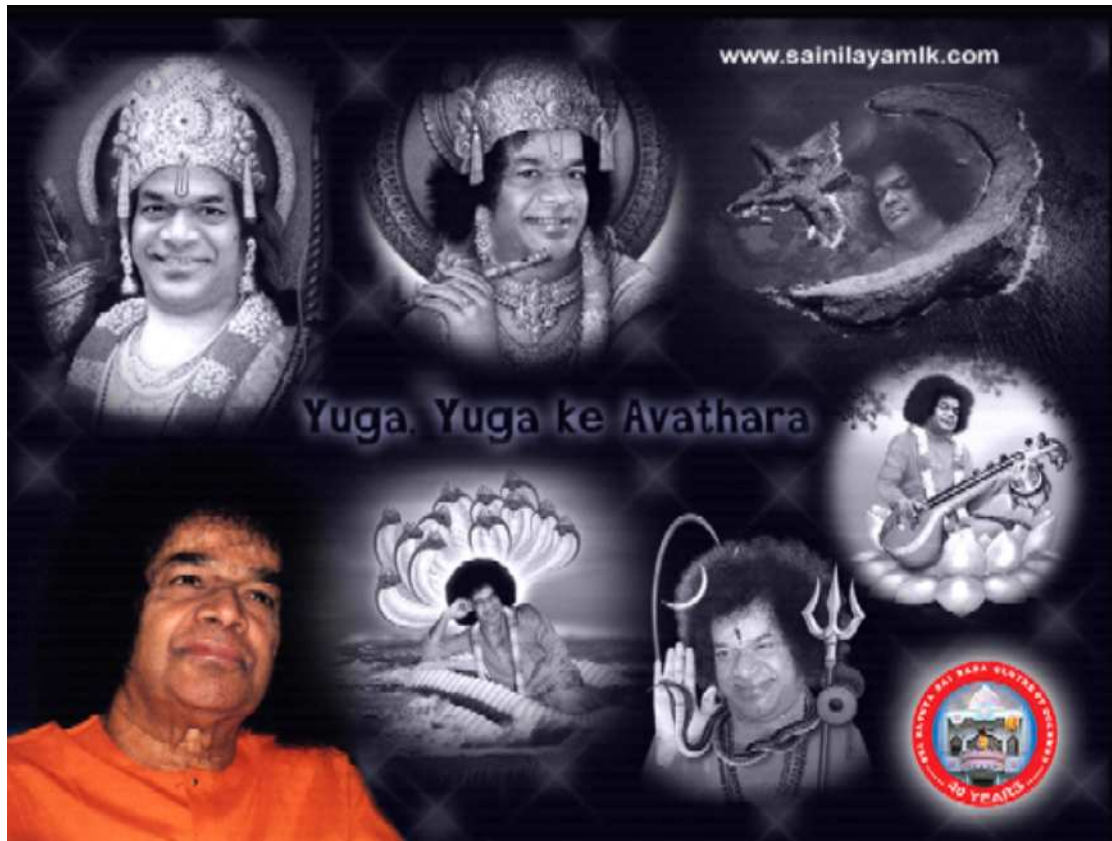


Fig.22 Incarnational Inclusivism—a devotional image (commemorative computer “desktop wall-paper”) depicting Sathya Sai Baba as (clockwise from top left): Rāma (cf. p.2); Kṛṣṇa; a reflection in the ocean of Islam (for which God is formless, but the crescent moon and star are symbolic islands); Sarasvatī (goddess of learning and the arts); Śiva (cf. Fig.25b); and Viṣṇu (reclining on his serpent couch). The title (in Hindi) translates as: “The Avatar of Every Epoch”.

cred symbols of Islam (in which any depiction of the deity in human form is blasphemous) are on a par with the Hindu avatars (Fig.22).

A considerable deal of flexibility in making such identifications is facilitated by the fact that the avatars were not uniformly enumerated to be ten, and, as we will see, some modern avatar figures have explicitly included Muhammad, Christ, and Zoroaster in this category. Traditionally also, as mentioned earlier, this flexibility must have contributed to the overall synthesis of the avatar concept. Soifer (1976:133) points out an observation by R.C.Hazra that ‘popular views regarding the names and numbers of the principal incarnations varied hopelessly before 800 A D’; but, as Daniel Sheridan (1986:60) notes, even the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* [i.e. c. 9-10th century CE]—one of the most homogeneous of the Purāṇas—variously enumerates, in addition to the above cited list, twenty-four, seven, eight, fourteen, or twenty-one avatars. As Parrinder (1970:75) notes, the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* in fact takes this to an extreme, holding that ‘the Avatars of Vishnu are innumerable’, and including as avatars (significantly in light of what we have seen): ‘Purusha, ...Kapila, founder of Sāṃkhya philosophy; ...Dattātreya, ...Yajña, the sacrifice;

...Rishabha, a righteous king; [and] ...Prithu, a king'³.

The details given in regard to such figures are also, to a large extent, derivative. As Ghurye (1962:164) writes, for example, the description of Kṛṣṇa found in the *Vāyu-Purāṇa*, 'the earliest of the Puranas, which is generally ascribed to the 2nd century A.D.' is 'fully resonant with the verbal sounds of the *Bhagavadgita*', and the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* especially, much picks up on, and reworks, ideas from the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. Martin Christof (2001:66-67) notes that the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* also 'tries to sound like the Veda', and that it:

takes both the Veda and Vedic ritual and reshapes them to meet its own ideological and ritual needs, thus sustaining its claim of being legitimate in the orthodox tradition... the authors... claim that the Veda itself was created by Viṣṇu and identify 'Nārāyaṇa, the *puruṣottama* or highest being'⁴, with the Vedic *puruṣa*.... the Purāṇa appropriated the territory held by the Veda, and, as a dynamic re-creation of it, it takes pieces of Vedic imagery and lore and presents them in a new setting.

And the above-cited *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* claim that there are 'innumerable' avatars exemplifies this, for Sheridan (1986:59) writes that:

When it refers to the divine manifestations, the *Bhāgavata* several times alludes to this *Rgveda* passage : "Who can exhaust the powers of Viṣṇu ? Not even one capable of counting the particles of dust on the earth can do it."⁵

The avatars—drawing here and in the cases we saw earlier on the vedic Viṣṇu—thus become an important means by which the various Purāṇas, as "new" traditions (albeit, after the meaning of the word *purāṇa*, reworking "old" stories), sought to gain legitimation. And, in turn, conceptions of the avatar greatly expanded their own symbolic repertoire, ever increasing the breadth of their reach.

One notable influence in this regard is Tantra; Parrinder (1970:91) writes:

The Tantra scriptures [c.5th century CE onwards] of the Śāktas⁶, worshippers of Śakti, are akin to the Purāṇas, and the goddess in addition to her other activities is identified with the Absolute. Tantric worship... involves complex ritual... left-handed Tantra sought release through indulgence in forbidden things... there is a passionate devotion to the goddess.

Parrinder (1970:92) finds 'no true Avatar' in the understandings of Tantra in general⁷, but he does attest to a significant influence of tantric traditions on modern

³ NB Some of these are adopted from earlier lists—see, for example, Brockington (1998), p.342,n.81.

⁴ Kosambi (2002:385) suggests that the title *Puruṣottama* was 'transferred' to Viṣṇu from Buddha.

⁵ For details of this see Sheridan (1986), p.61,n.32.

⁶ NB Other groups also produced Tantras—as Dandekar (1979:35) writes 'the *Tantras*... are emphatically sectarian in character. They relate mainly to the three sects Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, and Śākta'.

⁷ NB This is not to say that the Goddess is not portrayed as taking avatars—on the contrary, her doing so is a consistent theme of many traditional tales (see, e.g., Malik, 2005:84-87), but her appear-

avatar figures. Similarly, Bassuk (1987b:54-55) notes that ‘Tantrism and Vaisnavism supported each other’, and that both play ‘a significant role in the lives of the six [modern] Avatars’ in his study.

Sathya Sai Baba, however, rejects the common tantric practice of a *guru* issuing *mantras* to disciples, saying: ‘Avatars have never given mantras... recitation of a mantra is narrow minded. In the time of an Avatar, to hear him, to understand what he says and to do it is a mantra’⁸. But he does much acclaim the more general (devotional) efficacy of ‘the Name of the Lord uttered with Love’⁹ and even says of himself that it is ‘to restore faith in the Name that this *Avathaara* has come into the world, in the *Kaliyuga*’¹⁰. And all of these statements echo traditional attitudes—*Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 10:80.33-34 has Kṛṣṇa say, for example:

Those who, in this mundane existence, obtain oral instructions (in spiritual matters) from me as their preceptor, easily cross the ocean of saṁsāra.... ...I shall not be pleased (that much) by performance of sacrifices (or the duties of a householder’s life), by birth in excellent family, by the performance of the investiture of the sacred thread of *upanayana* (implying the observance of duties of a *brahmacārī* or celibate person [including receiving a *mantra* from one’s *guru*]).¹¹

And *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 12:3:51 emphasizes that:

Kali is certainly the Store-house of all evils. But... there is one great virtue and a good point in that age, inasmuch as by singing the name and the glory of Śrī Kṛṣṇa, that [*sic*] person is freed from all attachments and attains to the highest region.¹²

As I indicated earlier, the sheer volume of purāṇic material precludes the possibility of me presenting a comprehensive analysis of it here, but Parrinder (1970:72-74) does a good job of highlighting some relevant points:

The Vishnu Purāṇa was perhaps compiled about the sixth century A.D. It ...goes into raptures over the child Krishna and his mother. ...Krishna grew up among the cowherds, and his mischievous childhood is recounted. ...He stole butter, pulled the cows’ tails, and dragged trees from their places, laughingly showing his little white teeth. ...He defied the god Indra, telling the cowherds not to worship Indra but rather revere the mountain where they grazed their herds. Indra in anger sent a storm, but Krishna lifted up the mountain and sheltered his friends beneath it. Indra then came and paid homage to Krishna. Every so often there is a reminder that though Krishna is human, and plays childish tricks, yet he is eternal and the centre

ances as invoked by tantric ritual practices are not usually understood in this manner.

⁸ C XLIV 119 (1968-78)

⁹ (28-7-1967) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume07/sss07-25.pdf> [12-7-2007]

¹⁰ Sathya Sai Baba (3-10-1965) S5 45:248

¹¹ Tagare (1978), Part IV, p.1756-1757

¹² Tagare (1978), Part V, p.2142

of creation. His pranks are but part of his eternal play (*līlā*). The cowherds exclaim in astonishment, ‘we cannot believe you to be a man; your boyhood and humiliating birth are contradictions that fill us with doubt, for the gods would have attempted in vain the deeds which you have wrought’... Then he went out to dance with the cowgirls (*gopīs*) and each one thought him to be dancing with her alone.

In continuity with some of these traditions, Sathya Sai Baba’s devotees delight in tales of his mischievous childhood (see, e.g., ASN 41ff; 64ff.). Padmanaban (2000: 419) even claims that, in early 1948, Sathya Sai Baba paralleled the above-noted feat in which ‘Krishna simultaneously danced with each one of the Gopikas as proof of His all-pervasive presence in the universe’.

Babb (1986:187-188) notes that ‘the play of the gods expresses divine otherness’ but ‘also expresses nearness and intimacy’, and he sees ‘a very important feature of Sathya Sai Baba’s demeanor as perceived by many of his devotees... arising from a powerful image of Baba as a playful child’. And Sathya Sai Baba himself claims that his most prolific manifestation of *līlā* was in his childhood performance of (often “magical”) pranks, his ‘*Baala-leela*’¹³; indeed, this is a traditional “technical” term explicitly used of both Rāma and Kṛṣṇa to denote their indulgence in similar activities¹⁴. There is a deliberate theological tension being drawn here—Goldman (1995:81) writes:

The disparity between appearance and reality [in regard to the humanity of the avatars—cf. p.186 above] is perhaps most poignantly illustrated by the Vaiṣṇava poets’ particular fondness for the representation of Viṣṇu, especially as Kṛṣṇa, in the guise of that most disarming and vulnerable form of humanity, the infant.¹⁵

By way of explanation, he goes on to note that this is comparable to ‘the use of the infant Jesus as a favourite iconographic theme in Christian art and the centrality of the Christmas and its attendant emphasis of the God-as-child motif’.

In another parallel to Parrinder’s above-quoted passage, Sathya Sai Baba claims the remarkably quick development of his home town Prashanthi Nilayam as being solely his own accomplishment, very much portraying it as a “marvel that the gods (in this case previous avatars) might have attempted in vain”:

What has been accomplished at Prashaanthi Nilayam in the past fifty years could not have been achieved even in five hundred years. Although many *avatars* have done great things, no *avatar* has achieved the stupendous things done here in fifty years. All this has been accomplished by this single hand. A splendid university has been

¹³ Sathya Sai Baba (10-1953) S1 1:2

¹⁴ E.g. *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* 1:3.43; *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 3:2.2. NB For another description of Kṛṣṇa’s *bāla-līlās* see, for example, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10:8.28ff.

¹⁵ NB On this, see, also White (1970).

established here. A planetarium has been set up. In a small village like this, even an aerodrome is being constructed.¹⁶

Similarly, Sathya Sai Baba claims that he will surpass the “mountain-lifting” feat of Kṛṣṇa (mentioned by Parrinder above):

The splendour of this [Sai] *Avathaara* will go increasing, day by day. Formerly when the Govardhana hill was raised aloft by the little boy, the *gopees* and *gopaalas* realised that Krishna was the Lord. Now, it is not one Govardhana hill, a whole range will be lifted, you will see! Have patience, have faith [(6-7-1963) S3 15:92].

Sathya Sai Baba’s final exhortation here perhaps indicates that his portrayal of himself as superior to previous avatars may not merely be an exercise in self-aggrandisement; indeed, he elsewhere makes this explicit as he concludes a discourse in which he proclaims this superiority: ‘I am telling you all this, not to inform you about Me, but to strengthen you and render your faith firm’¹⁷.

Such proclamations of superiority can perhaps be seen as a continuity of a type of thinking common in purāṇic traditions—especially in the form of the so-called *māhātmyas* (“glorifications”) of deities (or, more commonly, of sacred places¹⁸) that constitute subsets of many Purāṇas. As Parrinder (1970:76) writes, the ‘Bhāgavata Purāṇa gives details of other Avatars... calling them ‘sportful Avatars’ (*līlāvatāra*)... But [holds that] Krishna is the Lord himself (*bhagavān svayam*), the Supreme Spirit’. And Matchett (2001:157) notes that, in this work, Kṛṣṇa:

rather than Nārāyaṇa or Puruṣa, is the primal reality behind all forms: indeed Nārāyaṇa, Puruṣa, and the *vyūhas* (see pp.164ff. above), along with the *avatāras*... are simply other forms of the Lord Kṛṣṇa.

In continuity with what we saw earlier in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, “everything is reduced to Kṛṣṇa”; the point, presumably, is similar to that indicated by Sathya Sai Baba above—to increase the faith of devotees in a single figure who is portrayed as superseding all other deities or avatars.

The *viśvarūpa*, the “universal form” (mentioned towards the end of the previous chapter) also much recurs in the Purāṇas, and, interestingly, in light of what we have just been discussing, in the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* this form occurs especially in connection with the child Kṛṣṇa, thereby further exaggerating the above-mentioned theological tension between child and deity in the avatar—the tiny frame and childish nature belie the enormous power and sheer size of this form.

¹⁶ Sathya Sai Baba (20-10-1990) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume23/sss23-29.pdf> [13-4-2007] NB Traditional stories of Kṛṣṇa’s construction of the city of Dvārakā (e.g. *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 10:50.49-58) surely surpass this, but perhaps Sathya Sai Baba is thinking more of modern avatars.

¹⁷ Sathya Sai Baba (30-9-1965) S5 42:236

¹⁸ See, e.g., Gonda (1977), pp.277ff.

In one example of this, after appearing to eat dirt (one of his “childish pranks”) Kṛṣṇa exhorts his mother to look into his mouth—upon which: ‘She (Yasodā) beheld therein the universe... the sphere of the earth... the moon, the stars, the (whole of the) planetary system’¹⁹. The granting of such visions came to be seen as a definitive feature of avatars in general²⁰, and, as we have seen, Sathya Sai Baba draws upon this idea in promoting his avatar persona. Indeed, he sometimes attributes to his own childhood incidents similar to that just described:

as she asked Sathya to open his mouth to pour water into it, Subbamma saw the magnificent spectacle of the entire creation: great celestial bodies revolving on their cosmic course, all amazingly contained inside the little mouth.²¹

Again, the paradox of the cosmos being “inside the little mouth” is highlighted.

Whilst these are predominantly “cosmic” visions, rather than “religious” (in the sense of involving specific deities) the various traditional deities *are* explicitly invoked in the prototypical *viśvarūpa* vision of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and in those of some of the purāṇic avatars. And, interestingly, these theophanies invoke traditional imagery most strongly associated with Rudra/Śiva—especially in the “terrible” or “destructive” aspect of the latter, which, like the *viśvarūpa*, draws upon symbolism of the *pralaya*, the cosmic conflagration that ends each *kalpa* (aeon)²². More generally speaking also, there does seem to be a complementarity between Viṣṇu and Śiva inherent in several of the traditional avatar accounts²³. Hildebrandt (1990:355-356) writes that ‘The *Mahābhārata* is a poem where “all the gods” are active in human form, with Viṣṇu—incarnate in Krishna—at their head, or at their “centre”, while Śiva remains typically remote’. But he cites Gonda (1970:102-104), who notes, for instance, certain ‘purāṇic passages which regard Viṣṇu as an integral part (*aṃśa*) of Śiva, as his *śakti* not different from himself’. Sathya Sai Baba’s portrayal of himself as an avatar in both Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava terms thus presents no

¹⁹ Tagare (1978:1303), translating *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 10:8.37-38 (cf. 10:7.35-36).

²⁰ Aditya Malik (2005:76) notes, for example, that a parallel to the passage just quoted occurs more than once in the context of ‘[p]roving one’s divinity’ in regard to the central avatar figures of the *Śrī Devnārāyaṇ Kathā*, a Rajasthani oral epic.

²¹ Sathya Sai Baba (transcript of videotape of discourse on 7-12-1995 [Padmanaban (2000), p.31]).

²² See, e.g., Soifer (1991), pp.81-82. On *pralaya* and *kalpa*, see p.340 below.

²³ See, e.g., Soifer (1991), pp.85-86,92. NB Matchett (2001:206,n53) notes that whilst ‘Madeleine Biarreau suggests that the *avatāra* figures all combine three ‘contradictions’ within themselves: (1) destruction and creation; (2) elements of Śiva and Viṣṇu; (3) *brāhmaṇa* and *kṣatriya* traits [cf. divine kingship]... [she] treats Paraśurāma’s story as the paradigm of the *avatāra* narrative... Yet the only argument in favour of treating Paraśurāma in this way appears to be the circular one that his story contains the very contradictions with Biarreau is seeking to establish as the defining characteristics of the *avatāra* figure’.

major point of incompatibility with this strand of traditional thinking. Moreover, as we will see in Section 4.6, such thoughts have an especially long and strong history in his geographic locale.

Parrinder (1970:72) notes another important motif in the avatar traditions that seems to have Śaiva connections. He states that ‘when Vishnu descends among men in various shapes his consort Śrī Lakshmī does this too’. This recalls the close companionship of Śiva and Śakti that we noted earlier, and Bassuk (1987b:21), goes so far as to conclude that:

Vishnu is an androgynous deity consisting of half male (Vishnu), and half female (Lakshmi or Shiva). According to a Hindu text, Shiva became an androgyne at Brahma’s request, and by means of yoga, Shiva enjoyed the female half of himself and created Vishnu, who then split his body in two and created all creatures. In so doing Vishnu became the father and mother of mankind, and in him can be observed a divine marriage between the god and the goddess, a hierogamy.

We have already seen echoes of similar ideas in Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings (see pp.109ff. above) and will see more of this below (pp.278ff.), and the presence of the figure of Śiva here again is noteworthy.

Parrinder (1970:87-88) writes: ‘There are few real Avatars and little Avatar doctrine in Śaivism²⁴, but Śiva is a complex character, and he makes visible appearances as a personal god, as Guru or in another character’²⁵, and he observes that:

there were clashes of Vishnu and Śiva in mythology, and fierce sectarian differences, yet there were also attempts at reconciliation and identification of these two great deities. In imagery Hari-Hara statues show Vishnu and Śiva as two halves of one figure.... In the Kūrma Purāṇa... the Īśvara-Gītā... is directly inspired by the Bhagavad-Gītā... [and] calls Vishnu (Nārāyaṇa) the soul of the universe, the eternal supreme Spirit... [and] Śiva... also ...the great God (Mahādeva), the supreme Lord... Those who consider Vishnu and Śiva as different do not obtain deliverance from re-birth... a throne descends from heaven, and Śiva sits there with Vishnu.

Similarly, Matchett (2001:190) writes that in the *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa*, ‘Kṛṣṇa reminds Śiva that they are both identical with each other’, and Sathya Sai Baba, certainly, often proclaims the compatibility, or identity, of these two figures. Matchett goes

²⁴ Matchett (2001:4) writes that: ‘Although there are texts which describe successive manifestations of Śiva or Devī [the goddess], it is clear from even a superficial reading that these passages are directly imitative of Vaiṣṇava *avatāra* lists’. Moreover, perhaps the most avatar-like of Śiva’s appearances occurs in—as Gonda (1970:106) describes it—a form (*rūpam*) that Śiva takes in Śaiva versions of the Narasiṃha avatar story. Cf., however, the following note.

²⁵ On the “appearances” (*mūrtis*, ‘manifestations’, lit. ‘forms’), of Śiva, in some South Indian (Tamil) Śaiva traditions, see p.289 below. As Dandekar (1976:93,101) writes: ‘In the Śaiva tradition, the Guru is believed to be infused with the spirit of Śiva—indeed, he is Śiva himself’; ‘In a sense, the Guru-tradition is to Śaivism what the Avatāra-theory is to Vaiṣṇavism’.

on to say, however that, in the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, ‘Śiva simply speaks as Kṛṣṇa’s *bhakta* who, along with other celestial beings, has taken refuge with him’, and this finds no parallel in Sathya Sai Baba’s understandings. But the Purāṇas (and especially the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*) do contain much else that resonates with Sathya Sai Baba’s views. We will encounter such material throughout this chapter, but I will finish this section by outlining some themes that link back to earlier traditions.

In keeping with traditional propensities for distinction, categorization and enumeration, and perhaps in keeping with the hierarchy of avatars posited in the *vyūha* concept, various avatar typologies were produced in the Purāṇas and other works (especially Pāñcarātra texts), and several of these find echoes in Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings. Of note are three ‘spiritual Avatars’ of Viṣṇu (noted earlier):

Karanodakashayi Vishnu – “The Lord who is lying on the causal ocean”. **Garbhodakashayi Vishnu** – “The Lord who is lying on the universal ocean”. **Kshirodakashayi Vishnu** – “The Lord who is lying on the milk ocean”.

Like the *vyūhas* and the *Puruṣa* (see p.164 above), these ‘spiritual Avatars’ function as progressive emanations that act as progenitors for the traditional terrestrial avatars²⁶, and especially the third of these emanations, Kṣīrodakaśāyī Viṣṇu, is often referred to as the source of all avatars²⁷. Interestingly, Sathya Sai Baba presents an interiorized version of this tradition:

No *Avathaar* is born flesh and blood, including this *Avathaar*. ...The embryo of ordinary mortals is *jalodhakashaayi* (enveloped in watery stuff); the embryo of the *Avathaar* is encased in *Ksheerodakashaayi* (the pure white milk of holiness). That is why in the makeup of the *Avathaar*, there is no blemish, there is no trace of *Guna*.²⁸

There is an echo here of Kṣīrodakaśāyī Viṣṇu’s traditional association with “goodness, holiness and purity” (*sattva guṇa*)—reflected in Sathya Sai Baba’s usage as ‘the pure white milk of holiness’, and, likewise, in the juxtaposition of this association with the fact that Kṣīrodakaśāyī Viṣṇu is ‘in no way in touch with the influence of the modes [*guṇas*]’²⁹. Moreover, the word ‘*Garbhodakaśāyī*’, the name of the second of the three emanations, could be rendered literally as meaning ‘abiding in the water of the womb’, another potential point of resemblance to Sathya Sai Baba’s interpretation. The specific context of his claim here has him telling of the conception of Rāma, which is traditionally held to have occurred through a di-

²⁶ <http://www.indiadvine.com/avatara-incarnations2.htm> [6-4-2003] (based on Prabhupāda 1974)

²⁷ A.C.Prabhupāda (citing the *Brahma-saṁhitā*) in his commentary on *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam: Sixth Canto, Part Three* (1972-), p.99. See also: Prabhupāda (1974), pt.2, vol.1, p.438.

²⁸ Sathya Sai Baba (4-2-1963) S3 3:22

²⁹ <http://www.indiadvine.com/avatara-incarnations2.htm> [6-4-2003] (based on Prabhupāda 1974)

vinely given milk-pudding—one further point of resemblance to Kṣīrodakaśāyī Viṣṇu. Thus, through an appeal to both traditional and rational authority (he seems to be presenting a “technical” account of the avatar—I will say more about this in the next section), Sathya Sai Baba homologizes himself to Rāma.

On a more obvious level, Sathya Sai Baba is also emphasizing what he wishes to be seen as the extraordinary nature of his origins as the avatar. Elsewhere, he highlights this, claiming: ‘I was not born through conception. It was Praveśa [entrance], and not Prasava [conception] I was born through a descent’.³⁰ I could find no traditional apposition of the two Sanskrit terms here, but they are commonly used in separate contexts with these meanings. *Prasava* translates as ‘begetting, procreation, generation, conception’, and *praveśa* as ‘entering, entrance’ [MW]. There is also perhaps a similarity here to the story of Kṛṣṇa’s conception in the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* (10:2.16-18), in which Viṣṇu is said to have entered (*āviveśa*) the mind of (Kṛṣṇa’s father) Vasudeva, before being transferred “mentally” (*manastah*) by Vasudeva to Devakī (Kṛṣṇa’s mother)—one of the traditional commentaries on the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* stressing in this regard that Kṛṣṇa’s conception was ‘not through [the] usual physiological process’³¹. Moreover, *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 10:3.31 describes Kṛṣṇa’s birth as mere ‘imitation of human ways’³², with a traditional commentator explicitly stating that ‘the Lord existed before Devakī and his appearance to have entered her womb is not a reality’³³, but, rather, ‘a wonderful imitation of the human (ways of the) world’³⁴.

All of this contrasts with Parrinder’s second “characteristic” of the avatars—*Avatars take worldly birth*. Parrinder (1970:120) refers to the stories cited here of the origins of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, but avers that ‘it is not suggested that these divinely sent children had no human fathers’, but he does not refer to the Sanskrit terms that I have noted, nor to the commentarial passages I have cited—which, I would say, *are* (at least in effect) such suggestions. The first of the above-

³⁰ Inside flap of *Ocean of Love* (Prashanthi Nilayam, 2000).

³¹ Tagare, Part IV, p.1264.

³² Laine (1989), p.266

³³ Tagare, Part IV, p.1272. NB Tagare (1978:2209) admits in an appendix that he has ‘freely utilised two standard [16th & 17th c.] commentaries in Marathi’ in producing his ‘translation’ of the Sanskrit of *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 10 & 11, but his ‘translation’ proves to include much that cannot strictly be derived from the original Sanskrit. It does have the advantage of making some of the ideas of these important traditional interpreters available in English, but discrimination is required—for whilst he does, as in this case, usually enclose any completely extraneous material in brackets, other commentarial material (as in the next reference that I cite) is irrevocably intertwined with his ‘translation’.

³⁴ Tagare, Part IV, p.1275.

bracketed Sanskrit terms recalls some general Pāñcarātra formulations of avatar ideas—these, as Parrinder (1970:59-60) does note, being ‘based on the notion of *āveśas*, ‘entrances’ or ‘possessions’ of the god into mundane forms’ (there is no question of “worldly birth”):

The ‘entrance-Avatar’ (*āveśāvatāra*) ...was of two kinds; the ‘power-entrance’ (*sakty-āveśa* [sic]) when Brahmā or Śiva were occasionally endowed with special powers, and the ‘own form entrance’ (*svarūpāveśa*) in Krishna, Rāma and the like. But superior to these were the ‘primary incarnations’ (*sākshād-avatāra*)... pure manifestations (*vyūha*) of Vishnu [which] created the world, protected beings, and helped devotees to final liberation.

What I noted earlier to be a Pāñcarātra affinity for distinction, enumeration and categorization is evident here, and, as we saw at the beginning of this section, and will especially see in the next section, other traditions also evidence such an affinity in relation to the avatars.

I will defer taking up the issue of the “worldly birth” of avatars in general and of Sathya Sai Baba in particular to Section 6.2 below (see p.378), for, although the Purāṇas much feature in this, a significant number of parallels can also be drawn in this regard with modern avatar figures, the like of which I have yet to formally introduce. We have at least seen in this section that the Purāṇas do proffer this and another of other significant themes and figures for our consideration. Indeed, as I noted at the beginning of this section, whilst the the term *avatāra* is first (and increasingly) used in the Purāṇas, we have seen a general increase in the diversity of ideas relating to the avatars, a diversity which is reflected (and, in true purāṇic spirit, even expanded) in Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings. We will see much more of this in the next section, as I progress to consider numerous traditional typologies and “technical” terms associated with the avatars.

4.2 Traditional Typologies & “Technical” Terms

God... incarnates in countless ways; He comes as an incarnation of a Kala (fragment) of His, or an Amsa (part) of His; He comes as an inner inspirer for some definite purpose; He comes to close an epoch and inaugurate another (Yugavathar).¹

In the previous section (and earlier), we saw hints that some representations of avatar ideas divide avatars into types and/or employ Sanskrit “technical” terms in describing them, and we will see in this section that many (mostly medieval) examples of this find echoes in Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings. Sathya Sai Baba’s statement at top here exemplifies this. Sheth (2002:100,n19) notes that ‘Bengal Vaiṣṇavism’ (i.e. that especially influenced by Caitanya) categorizes avatars into (amongst others): ‘*Kalpa*-, *Manvantara*-, and *Yuga-avatāras*, which descend during the cosmic periods called *Kalpas*, and so forth’², and the “inner inspirer” to which Sathya Sai Baba refers is presumably the *antaryāmin* avatar of the five-fold Pāñcarātra typology that I cited earlier (p.173). The other two terms above derive from the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, which, after enumerating 24 avatars, terms them *aṁśas* and *kalās*³, these being contrasted to the idea, cited earlier, that Kṛṣṇa is ‘the Lord himself’ (see p.219 above).

A traditional commentary on *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 1:3.28, the last of the verses in question here, holds that: ‘Kṛṣṇa is perfect (*pūrṇa*) because all potencies [*śakti*] are seen to be in full swing in this Descent’⁴, and the term *pūrṇa* (lit. “full”, usually in opposition to *aṁśa*, “part”) became another common “technical” type applied to the avatars. Sathya Sai Baba, certainly, employs this term in connection with Kṛṣṇa, and, perhaps unsurprisingly—in light of what we have seen of his claims to greatness—he also applies it to himself (see p.121). He also makes a technical distinction between “full” and “partial” avatars using alternative traditional terms:

When the formless transforms itself, it may appear as *Vibhavaakaara* or as *Swa-akaara* (endowed with some particular glory or power or as the full manifestation of itself) [(14-10-1964) S4 34:202].

As we saw earlier (p.173), the term *vibhava* occurs in Pāñcarātra traditions, hence *svākāra* here is perhaps an analogue or derivative of the Pāñcarātra term *svārū-*

¹ Sathya Sai Baba BV 28:180 (cf. BV 1:3).

² NB On these, see p.340 below. See also *Caitanya-Caritāmṛta* 2:6.100.

³ See Sheridan (1986), pp.61-62.

⁴ Sheridan, (1986), p.67—citing the *Bhāgavata-Bhāvartha-Dīpikā* (c.1325CE) of Śrīdhara. NB The reference here is perhaps to some tantric theories, in which, as Woodroffe (1969:228) notes: ‘The Śakti of a Devatā is divided into sixteen Kalās or “parts” of power. That aspect of Devatā which has full power is called Pūrṇa-Kalāmūrti’. We will see more of the *kalās* as applied to the avatars below.

pāveśa that we also encountered above (see p.224)⁵. Indeed, Sathya Sai Baba sometimes precisely reiterates the above-cited Pāñcarātra theory of five forms of divinity, and he identifies (through resemblance) the *vibhava* and *arcana* types posited by this theory with the *pūrṇa* and *aṃśa* avatars (respectively)⁶.

And his jargon does not stop there; he goes on to distinguish within the category of *aṃśāvatāra* two further types—‘*Yamadhuutha* and *Avadhuutha*’—according to him, ‘messengers of God’: ‘*Yamadhuuthas* are messengers who inflict harm on people. *Avadhuuthas* are messengers who protect’⁷. I found no similar usage of these terms in traditional avatar theories, but in other traditional contexts the term *Yamadūta* is used to refer to the death-dealing messengers of Yama (god of death), and *avadhūta*, as Sir John Woodroffe (1913:207,n9) notes, is explained in some tantric traditions as *ava-dhū-cta* (one who has ‘shaken off, rejected... separated himself from the world’)—i.e. a wandering ascetic. Moreover, as Woodroffe (1913:377) translates, *Mahānirvāṇa-Tantra* 14:149 holds that ‘*Avadhūtas* are of two classes, according as they are perfect [‘*Pūrṇa*, or complete’] or imperfect [‘*Apūrṇa*, or incomplete’]’. There does seem, then, to be some traditional basis for Sathya Sai Baba’s ideas in this regard—or at least sufficient grounds within which, through inclusivism, distinction, enumeration, categorization, and resemblance, the genesis of such ideas (whether in Sathya Sai Baba’s thought or in earlier works) becomes comprehensible.

For another of his interpretations of the distinction between full and partial avatars, however, I was completely unable to locate a traditional precedent. He raises the question of whether avatars are constantly aware of their divinity (he gives Kṛṣṇa as an example of this) or whether they may at times forget and even pray to the gods (the example here being Rāma)⁸. But this assertion proves to have a didactic purpose—his point, as he goes on to say, is to promote “faith in Krishna as the Lord”, and he elsewhere maintains Rāma to be a full avatar⁹, dismissing any appearances to the contrary as being mere ‘acting’ on Rāma’s part¹⁰. And, even in

⁵ Note, however, the fact that in some Śaiva traditions, the precise terms used by Sathya Sai Baba here are applied to varying manifestations of Śiva (Daniélou 1964).

⁶ Traditionally, as indicated earlier, *arcāvatāra* refers only to manifestations of divinity in idols, but Sathya Sai Baba equates it with *aṃśāvatāra*, giving Śaṅkara as an example of an ‘*archanavatar*’.

⁷ Sathya Sai Baba (6-9-1996) S29 42:304

⁸ Sathya Sai Baba (26-11-1964) S4 40:235

⁹ Sathya Sai Baba (14-8-1990) S23 26:204

¹⁰ Sathya Sai Baba (21-5-1995) http://xb.xoom.it/_XOOM/Esonet/encyclopedia/SaiBaba/Articoli/daTradurre/register/d95my21.htm [1-9-2001]

asserting Rāma's status as a full avatar, he contrasts this with what he sees as the deplorable quest of ordinary persons (who he casts as *aṃśāvatāras*) for divinity outside of themselves—when, all along, they have an *aṃśa* of the divine within¹¹ (i.e. he uses this avatar-typology as something of an *arthavāda*).

The distinction between full and partial avatars is certainly the most common of traditional distinctions¹², but—perhaps as a legacy of the Pāñcarātra affinity for pentads (see p.173,n.43)—five-fold distinctions also seem to occur frequently, and Sathya Sai Baba refers to another five-fold classification of avatars:

God has descended as [a] human incarnation in five different forms. ...One is *Nityaavatar*. Second is *Viśeṣaavatar*. Third, *Aveśaavatar*. Fourth, *Leelaavatar*, Fifth, *Poornaavatar*. *Leelaavatar* is also known as *Amsaavatar*. *Nityaavatara*, *Viśeṣaavatar* and *Aveśaavatar* have only five to nine *kalaas* (aspects) of the Lord. Only in the *Poornaavatar* are all the sixteen aspects of the Divine present. ...In this context, every human being must be deemed as *Avatar* as he has some aspect of the Divine in him [(23-11-1988) S21 33:266]

I was again unable to track down a traditional source (if indeed there is any¹³) for this reference, but *Caitanya-Caritāmṛta* 2:6.99 (interpreting references in the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*¹⁴) refers to *līlāvatāras*—this name being given by it to the major traditional avatars. *Nityāvātara* (“eternal avatar”) is sometimes used as an alternative to the term *arcāvatāra* (“incarnation in idols”) mentioned earlier, and perhaps also refers to the following distinction, noted by Sheth (2002:106-107):

once the avatars have accomplished the purposes for which they have descended, they abandon their bodies, thus returning to their original (Viṣṇu) form. There are exceptions, however. For example, in Bengal Vaisnavism [some of] the *avatāras* are eternal; that is, the *avatāra* always has that form and never discards it.¹⁵

The *Caitanya-Caritāmṛta* (2:20.367) also refers to *śaktyāveśāvatāras*—a term evidently adopted from the Pāñcarātra typology cited earlier—this name denoting the

¹¹ Sathya Sai Baba (14-8-1990) S23 26:204

¹² NB Sheth (2002:99-100,n18) cites another example of this in the fact that the *svarūpāvatāras* (mentioned earlier, p.73) are considered by the Nimbārka school to be ‘of two types: (i) *Aṃśārūpa*, in whom God is fully present but manifests only part of his powers, qualities, and so forth, and (ii) *Pūrṇārūpa*, in whom God manifests his powers, qualities, and so forth completely’.

¹³ NB Writings on the modern Indian avatar Adigalar (see Section 5.4), invoke similar ideas to this, but vaguely attribute them to ‘Ancient Rishis, modern philosophers, and theosophists’ (<http://www.omsakthi.org/writings/avatar3.html> [20-2-2007]). I did come across another very similar, and possibly traditional account on the internet, but it too gives no reference for its claims, and its list of the *kalās* is evidently an expansion of five traditional *kalās* of Śiva (see Daniélou 1964:207), none of which occur in Sathya Sai Baba's lists. It also gives little place to ethical concerns, but does allow for apotheosis (See <http://www.urday.com/krishna.htm> [6-8-2005]).

¹⁴ On these references see Sheridan (1986), p.65.

¹⁵ For more examples of this, and references, see Sheth (2002), p.120,n.46.

belief that such avatars are “empowered” with some particular ability to effect certain worldly ends (from creating the world to killing demons, to teaching doctrine and devotion). The more general term *āveśāvatāra* also harks back to Pāñcarātra terminology (p.223 above), and the Sanskrit term *viśeṣa* presumably means “special”, although I have not come across any traditional usage of this term in this context. And the concept of sixteen ‘aspects’ (*kalās*) of divinity is of course one that we have already discussed (see Section 3.3).

It is, in any case, clear from the last line of Sathya Sai Baba’s above-cited passage that this is another *arthavāda*—pointing to the ultimate unity human and divine. Indeed, he goes on to say:

When you have the faith that you are Divine, you are unlikely to go astray. ...There is really no difference between the *Avatars* and yourselves except with regard to the number of aspects of the Divine present in each one. These aspects can be enhanced by right conduct and by developing Divine love [p.269].

Elsewhere, he even appropriates an idea propounded by Madhva (13th century CE), for whom—as B.N.K.Sharma (1986:354), notes—‘all Avatāras are of equal merit and status. There is no question of degrees of fullness among them, no “partial” and “complete Avatāras”. Thus, Sathya Sai Baba says:

The *Krishna avatar* has been described as a *Purna Avatar*---an incarnation with the plenitude of divine attributes. All *avatars* are equally divine and it is pointless to describe one incarnation as partial and another as full. ...*Avatars* are not to be judged in quantitative terms. Qualitatively, they are all essentially one. All *avatars* are “full” in fact [S19 18:145 (27-8-1986)].

Madhva’s teaching, however, reflects his general “dualist” (*dvaita*) orientation—he wishes to ensure a permanent distinction between the human and divine, a distinction obviously ill-fitted to the concept of varying grades of avatars (the implicit equation being: more divine:less divine::less human:more human). But Sathya Sai Baba, in keeping with what we have seen to be his own general philosophical orientation, puts the above to the service of *advaita*—all are ‘essentially one’.

And he goes on from this last passage, after giving some examples of folk-etymological interpretations of the name of Kṛṣṇa (one which he ascribes to ‘the pundits’; the other, his own version, which he says gives the ‘inner significance’ of the first), to state:

Going by the letters in the name alone, scholars have derived the divine attributes of Krishna as *avatar*. ...The nature of the Divine, however, is not to be determined by the name of a particular *Avatar*. ...Men may describe the Divine in innumerable ways according to their experience and understanding. These are subjective expres-

sions and do not reveal the real nature of the Divine. ...What is important is to recognise that there is no basic difference between the human and the Divine.

For Sathya Sai Baba, then, the *advaita* conception of the absence-of-difference between the individual and the divine is ‘important’—he does not say this about any of the details of the particular traditions that we have just seen him referring to, indeed he here criticizes (traditional) scholars for taking such details seriously. But he does, as we have seen and will further see, much draw upon such details nonetheless, and his primary purpose in this will become clear shortly.

Perhaps through the alignment of the *vyūhas* with the avatars (see Section 3.3), the six Pāñcarātra *guṇas* (“qualities”) of the divine (see p.175) came to be specifically ascribed in the Purāṇas to the avatars. Or perhaps this occurred through the resemblance of these to another group of six (very different) *guṇas* that are given as characteristics of kings in some traditions even prior to the Pāñcarātra¹⁶. It is noteworthy that *Rāmāyaṇa* 2:30.12, for example, lists and ascribes the six *guṇas* (*ṣaḍguṇāḥ*) of a king to Rāma, and *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 1:3.36 describes Kṛṣṇa as ‘Lord of the six qualities’ (*ṣaḍguṇeśaḥ*) without listing these six—whereupon various commentators and later Vaiṣṇava theologians supply details similar to those of the Pāñcarātra *guṇas*. Or, again, in some of the Purāṇas, a close variation upon the six *guṇas* is given as part of a folk-etymology of the epithet ‘Bhagavān’—which is often applied to the avatars, and which Sathya Sai Baba applies both to himself and to the ‘unified form’ of the *vyūhas*¹⁷. As Alain Daniélou (1964:36) notes, *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa* 6:5.74-76 lists six *bhaga* [“shares”]¹⁸ of Bhagavān¹⁹: ‘absolute might (*aiśvarya*), righteousness (*dharma*), glory (*yaśas*), beauty (*śrī*), knowledge (*jñāna*), and nonattachment (*vairāgya*)’. Significantly (as we will see, p.231) it immediately follows these by asserting Bhagavān’s knowledge of ‘the rise and dissolution, the coming and going... of all beings’.

Certainly, echoes of this list find their way into Sathya Sai Baba’s ideas:

The term “*Bhaga*” represents six attributes: Divine wealth, righteousness, power, fame, detachment and Supreme Wisdom. The Lord is called “*Bhagavan*” because He has these six attributes. Thus every name of the Lord is related to specific attributes and not an expression of the devotee’s feelings or fancies.²⁰

¹⁶ See Mitsunori Matsubara (1994), p.182,n.75.

¹⁷ Sathya Sai Baba (7-4-1989) S22 8:59

¹⁸ NB *Bhaga* also means ‘good fortune, happiness, welfare, prosperity’ (MW).

¹⁹ NB *Bhagavān* literally connotes “one possessed of *bhaga*”—hence the connection here—but a more linguistically accurate interpretation of this renders it ‘fortunate... prosperous... divine’ (MW).

²⁰ (01-01-1992) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume25/sss25-01.pdf> [28-11-2006]

Sathya Sai Baba’s last statement here highlights an important purpose that such explanations of divinity sometimes serve—they lend a “rational” air to the traditions in question, imbuing them with something akin to Weber’s “rational-legal authority”—over and above any “traditional authority” that they may, or may not (for any particular audience), command. A suggestion by Paul Griffiths (1989: 503) in regard to some analogous lists of ‘*guṇas*’ and descriptive epithets of the Buddha in Buddhist traditions accords with this: ‘the development of and commentary upon these epithet lists show a desire to give a systematic analysis of what it is to be a Buddha, a desire to limn maximal greatness’. In Sathya Sai Baba’s case, as a living exponent of tradition and a concrete referent for the epithet *Bhagavān*, this translates into a direct augmentation of his authority, magnified by the laudatory nature of the *bhagas* (or *guṇas*) themselves.

What may have once been practically-oriented, consistent, technical terms (in Sāṃkhya, or Yoga, or some specific Pāñcarātra sect), are often invoked in later traditions to create authority simply from the *impression* that there is a traditional body of complex, systematic, theological knowledge upon which devotees might draw. Sathya Sai Baba, following in the footsteps of such traditions, seems to revel in references to various, and often inconsistent, traditionally enumerated lists of all manner of entities—the prolific number and variety of which is presumably a result of a combination of the general enumerative tendencies identified earlier with an ever-increasing number of recapitulations of the same across diverse contexts and groups. Ironically, whilst enumerations may have originally been intended to serve mnemonic ends, they must have nonetheless—when the precise number of items or one or more members of a certain list were forgotten—acted as fertile templates for the production of alternate forms of traditions. And the epic traditions especially—rather than giving just one definitive version of these forms—tend to simply include within themselves the variant readings.

This can sometimes be accounted for by the fact that one particular version may better illustrate certain aspects of a doctrine or myth under discussion, or may better suit certain metrical contexts, but, more often, I would suggest, this is simply another variation on the theme of inclusivism—in the sense of a tendency to not reject any tradition for merely being inconsistent, but to simply include each version of it in the form in which it has been received, engendering traditional (and rational) authority thereby. Sheridan (1986:85) writes of the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, for example, that: ‘As an inclusive *Purāṇa*, the *Bhāgavata* neglects, though at some

cost to consistency, no part of Vaiṣṇava wisdom’.

In any case, of relevance to our focus, it is noteworthy that Sathya Sai Baba gives several additional variants of the lists of *guṇas* and *bhagas* (“qualities”, “shares”, or “attributes”) cited above, sometimes presenting these as being definitive of the avatar. Thus, for example, he says:

Bhagavaan has seven chief characteristics: *Aishvarya*, *Keerthi*, *Jnaana*, *Vairaagya*, *Srishti*, *Sthithi* and *Laya* (prosperity, fame, wisdom, non-attachment, creation, preservation and dissolution). ...These seven are the unfailing characteristics of *Avathaars* [(30-9-1960) S1 32:200].

Or, again:

Every *Avatar* has six types of powers: all-encompassing Prosperity, Righteousness, Fame, Wealth, Wisdom and Renunciation (or non-attachment). God is the possessor of these six attributes. Sri Rama had all these six attributes in equal measure. Every *Avatar* of God in every age and every place has these [(14-04-1989) S22 9:66].²¹

And, elsewhere, he gives diverse accounts of meaning and significance of the individual members of these lists—I will outline a few of these here.

He gives various descriptions of *aiśvarya* (‘wealth’, alternatively: *sampada* or *śrī*)²². Sometimes, in a very general way, he simply says that: ‘The Divine possesses every conceivable form of wealth’²³, and this parallels traditional understandings, for—as S.K.De (1961:276) notes—Jīva Gosvāmin defines *śrī* as referring to the avatar’s possession of ‘all kinds of prosperity’. At other times Sathya Sai Baba seems to refer to *aiśvarya* simply to lend a “technical” air to his discourse, to engender rational authority, as other members of the six *guṇas* (or perhaps *bhagas*, ‘fortunes’—via resemblance of meaning) creep into his definitions, in a category which he refers to as ‘the six forms of *Aiswarya*’²⁴: ‘*Aishvarya* includes not only property, movable and immovable, but also strength, knowledge, skill, intelligence and prosperity’²⁵. Alternatively, he gives a (completely different) traditional eight-fold classification as a (“technical”) explanation for the manner in which the ‘attributeless God’ assumes human characteristics²⁶—elsewhere describing this as ‘the eight-fold wealth’²⁷. Traditionally also, there seems to have been some overlap between an eight-fold *aiśvarya*-list and the conception of *guṇas*, with these again being used to create rational authority. *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 12:2.19, for ex-

²¹ Cf. Sathya Sai Baba (24-8-1989) S22 25:176.

²² Cf. Sathyam-3 (17) 272

²³ (23-11-1989) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume22/sss22-37.pdf> [12-7-2007]

²⁴ (21-05-1991) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume24/sss24-08.pdf> [12-7-2007]

²⁵ (10-04-1993) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume26/sss26-13.pdf> [12-7-2007]

²⁶ Sathya Sai Baba (23-7-1975) S13 16:92

²⁷ (14-4-1993) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume26/sss26-14.pdf> [12-7-2007]

ample, describes the avatar as being “possessed of the eight-fold wealth-qualities” (*aṣṭaiśvarya-guṇānvitaḥ*)—albeit without elaborating upon the meaning of this²⁸.

As De (1961:276) notes, possession of *jñāna* (wisdom) is understood by the followers of Caitanya to refer to the avatar’s ‘omniscience (*sarvajñatvam*)’, and we have already seen several references to Sathya Sai Baba’s supposed ‘omniscience’. We encountered earlier his claim to know ‘everything of all things’, and I might further call attention here to a claim that he makes to see ‘the past, the present moment, the future and everywhere in every direction’²⁹—a claim which parallels traditional understandings of *jñāna* in this context: ‘the capability of having direct vision of everything as it is simultaneously’³⁰. Such understandings are themselves paralleled in *Bhagavad-Gītā* 7:26—Kṛṣṇa avers: “O Arjuna, I know beings past and present and that will be’. Further to this, Sathya Sai Baba claims by virtue of his avatar identity to possess knowledge suitable for spiritual guidance and knowledge of his own spiritual position and power: ‘The *Avathaara-purusha*... is aware of the pilgrim, the path and the goal. He is the Master of creation and He is fully conscious of his power’³¹.

Furthermore, he cites as definitive of his avatarhood his supposed ability to answer any question ‘without any pause, and in detail’³², and he claims to possess uniquely comprehensive knowledge of scripture:

The essence of the *Vedanta* can be compressed in a small message. But that small message condenses the import of 15,000 *mantras*. I shall reveal to you the meaning of these *mantras*. This cannot be done by anyone except the Divine.³³

²⁸ Tagare (1978, Part V:2132), presumably drawing upon early modern translations of this passage (cf. p.223, n.33 above), glosses this as referring to the eight *siddhis* (on which see p.348 below) and takes *guṇa* to refer to certain moral ‘excellences’, but it would seem to me that one or both of these are more likely a reference to the ‘qualities’ that we are considering here. NB Despite Sathya Sai Baba’s many references to *aiśvarya* as an ‘attribute’ of the divine, and his presentation of it as definitive of the avatar, he does not specifically apply it to himself, at least not in its primary meaning, ‘wealth’—quite the opposite—he says: ‘I do not own anything’ (his multi-billion-rupee properties are indeed administered by trusts), citing ethical reasons: ‘The money that comes from the people should be given back to them in one way or other. This is Bhagavaan’s will’ (14-1-1996) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume29/sss29-02.pdf> [12-7-2007]. This is a major point of contrast between Sathya Sai Baba and some of the other prominent modern Indian *gurus*, most notably Rajneesh/Osho (on whom see Urban (2005)), and hardly accords well with the views of Babb, McKean, and Urban (2003a, cited earlier) that Sathya Sai Baba is legitimising consumer-capitalism for his (especially middle-class Indian) followers.

²⁹ C (1968-78) XXV 73

³⁰ Srinivasa Chari (1994:188), citing Nāthamuni’s *Nyāyatattva* (9th century CE).

³¹ (24-2-1971) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume11/sss11-14.pdf> [12-7-2007]

³² C (1968-78) XLIV 120.

³³ (31-7-1996) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume29/sss29-31.pdf> [12-7-2007]

That it is Sathya Sai Baba's avatar identity that is at issue here becomes clear as he goes on to say that he has made this proclamation lest: 'Seeing this [i.e. his] human form you may be tempted to treat it casually'. He is attempting to persuade his devotees to place more value on his teachings, and—via the law of supply-and-demand—the perception of scarcity that he creates above ('This cannot be done by anyone except the Divine') augments this. Indeed, he goes on to claim that:

This kind of blessing has not happened to anyone in any previous *avatar*. ...Your good fortune will fructify immensely if you make good use of this opportunity to learn and benefit from Swami's teachings.³⁴

There is something in all of this of purāṇic tendencies to praise one deity as supreme (via *māhātmyas*, see p.219), but it perhaps bears some further analysis.

There is a resonance here with what Waldman and Baum (1992:245-246) note to be necessary to produce religious authority based on 'oppositional "charisma"':

The need to be self-proving³⁵ can require oppositional figures to define their roles over and against well-established definitions of similar roles... constructing identities that must oscillate between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

Waldman and Baum (1992:273,245) conclude that the figures they studied 'drew meaning and strength from opposition, the very process of competition became a source of authority for them'. This was only so, however, within limits—'They had to be different enough to provoke opposition or to provide a clear alternative to the status quo, but they could not be so different as to be ignored'. This perhaps goes some way towards explaining the large amount of thoroughly traditional material that we have seen in Sathya Sai Baba's persona, for he clearly does, on some level, need to portray himself as fitting in with previous avatar traditions. And the very role of avatar is ideal for meeting both of the requirements here, for Waldman and Baum write that 'oppositional figures... must often identify themselves with a more vaguely understood or less commonly occupied role', and, as we have seen (and will further see, especially in Chapter 5), whilst avatars are many (providing plenty of basis for comparison), claims to be "the avatar" are rare (providing plenty of scope for difference).

The final three 'characteristics' of the avatar cited by Sathya Sai Baba above: *śṛṣṭi*, *sthiti*, and *laya* (creation, preservation, and destruction), are also—usually as a completely independent group of three characteristics, and often individually—traditionally associated with the avatars (cf., e.g., *Bhagavad-Gītā* 9:18). And, per-

³⁴ (31-7-1996) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume29/sss29-31.pdf> [12-7-2007]

³⁵ I.e. in the absence of traditional authority for the charismatic's role.

haps finding their way into Sathya Sai Baba’s list of *seven* (rather than the usual six) characteristics through their association with the epithet *Bhagavān* testified to by the above-quoted *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa* passage (p.229), they are elsewhere variously ascribed by Sathya Sai Baba to himself. Thus, for example, he poetically describes his ‘creation’³⁶ and ‘fostering’³⁷ of the world and claims that he could ‘in an instant, make the entire universe vanish’³⁸. He also ties them in with his penchant for ‘materialising’ objects—thus portraying this as evidence for his divinity:

This is merely the nature of *Avathaara*: the creation of things *ab inito*, with intent to protect, guard and give joy.... Creation, Preservation and Dissolution---these three, only the Almighty can accomplish; no one else can. Cynics carp without knowledge. If they learn the *Shaasthras*, they can understand Me...[(13-12-1964) S4 45:268].

Again, this is an appeal to both traditional and rational-legal authority. Some of the Śāstras are quite literally traditional legal authorities, although as Benjamin Walker (1968:372) notes, “*śāstra*” can refer to ‘any religious or philosophical treatise’. Also, in this more general sense of the term, *Caitanya-Caritāmṛta* 2:20.352-355 states that ‘an incarnation is accepted according to the directions of the śāstras’, claiming that an avatar can be recognized: ‘Only by His extraordinary prowess and uncommon activities, which are impossible for embodied living entities’³⁹.

There is, however, a sense in which, for Sathya Sai Baba at least, what is ‘impossible’ for ordinary persons, or what ‘only the Almighty can accomplish’, are rhetorical, rather than ontological statements. He elsewhere proclaims:

You see differences in individuals; but, in My view, all are one. I and you are one. ...When you understand the principle of unity and hold on to it firmly, you become Sai Baba yourself.⁴⁰

And he notes that “Annamaachaarya, the mystic poet, ...sang: “*To what extent out minds do reach / To that extent your vision we get*”⁴¹. The popular Telugu poet Tāḷlapāka Annamācārya (1408-1503)⁴² indeed held such views—Chandaka Sri

³⁶ Preface to SBM (August 2000 reprint).

³⁷ Sathya Sai Baba (22-12-1971) S11 34:218

³⁸ C (1968-78) XLII 113

³⁹ Prabhupāda, A.C. (trans.), *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta of Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmī* (1974), p.199

⁴⁰ Sathya Sai Baba (21-3-2004) <http://www.sathyasai.org/discour/2004/do40321.html> [1-6-2007]

⁴¹ Sathya Sai Baba says (29-2-1984) S17:31. NB Sathya Sai Baba also often connects such ideas with (a paraphrase of) a modern English poem to the same effect—he says: ‘God if you think, God you are. Dust if you think, dust you are. Think God. Be God. You are God. Realize it! Sathya Sai Baba (<http://www.cosmicharmony.com/Ia/Serenity/Srenity6.htm> [1-3-2007]); cf. Bhagavan Das (1924), p.80. He is also perhaps echoing similar sentiments popularized by Vivekananda (<http://www.cosmicharmony.com/Ia/Serenity/Srenity6.htm> [1-3-2007]).

⁴² NB On Annamācārya, see Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman (2005).

Krishna (2004:308) cites him in this regard:

If an elephant is thought of, or concentrate[d] upon in his vision, he himself will transform into the elephant himself. ...when the *sādhaka* imagines a tree he himself will become a tree. ... by concentrating upon the Lord Śrī Vēṅkatēśvara⁴³ of Tirupati [Fig.23] he himself will become Śrīpati [Viṣṇu]. ...the moment *jivātma* the individual soul imagines the divinity he can visualize *Paramātmā* [“the supreme spirit”] himself and becomes one with i[t].

Annamācārya thus acts as a source of traditional authority for Sathya Sai Baba’s views, but similar ideas are encapsulated in yet another host of traditional “technical terms”, sources of rational authority, which identify the avatars with the non-dual *ātman/brahman*. And some of these are echoed in Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar persona. He refers to himself as the ‘embodiment of the *Atma*’⁴⁴, and often aligns himself with various traditional attributes of *ātman/brahman*: ‘Actionless, ever-abiding/unchanging/formless am I’⁴⁵; ‘I am the Witness of activity not a participant’⁴⁶; ‘the Truth of Truths (*Sathyasya Sathyam*)... above and beyond the *Gunas*’⁴⁷; ‘*The Eternal, with neither entrance nor exit; The One who neither Was nor Is nor Will be; The Immortal Person free from birth and death[;] That Ever-effulgent Aathman*’⁴⁸. And he explicitly connects this with his avatar identity: ‘*Atma* is the foundation. It is *Brahmam*. It is *Paratatwa* (Supreme Cosmic Principle). It is the *Paramatma* (Omni-Self). It is the *Avataric* principle’⁴⁹.

Most of the details here find parallels in the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*. For example: *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 10:40.1 describes Kṛṣṇa as ‘the First Principle not subject to change or modification’; 10:2.26 as ‘the truth of the truth’ [*satyasya satyam*]; 10:3.19 lauds him as being ‘above all *guṇas*’; and 10:66.38 describes him as ‘a witness [*sākṣī*] to whatever happens within and without all created beings’⁵⁰. But similar ideas are found in many traditional works—for example, as Matchett (2001:98) notes, Kṛṣṇa is described in *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa* 5.13.60,62 as ‘the immeasurable Self’: ‘everything is pervaded by him and he dwells in everything’, and even

⁴³ On Vēṅkatēśvara (a.k.a.) Śrīnivāsa (i.e. a form of Viṣṇu), see, e.g., Anila Verghese (1995), pp.69ff. NB The “Suprabhātam”, “awakening” prayer sung daily at Prashanthi Nilayam is based upon its equivalent at the temple of Vēṅkatēśvara—on which see: Pidatala Sitapati (1998), pp.48ff.

⁴⁴ (14-8-1990) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume23/sss23-26.pdf> [12-7-2007]

⁴⁵ Sathya Sai Baba, San (10-1992) 227

⁴⁶ Sathya Sai Baba (24-3-1973) S12 9:40

⁴⁷ Sathya Sai Baba (11-10-1970) S10 30:184-185

⁴⁸ Sathya Sai Baba (23-11-1979) S14 43:279

⁴⁹ Sathya Sai Baba (24-3-1991) S24 6:55

⁵⁰ Tagare (1978), Part 4, pp.1498,1273,1678.

the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (e.g. 10:12,20), upon which especially the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* bases many of its ideas, holds that Kṛṣṇa is: “the supreme (*param*) *brahman*... the immortal (or changeless, *śāśvataṃ*) divine *puruṣa*, the first deity, the unborn lord... the soul (*ātmā*)... etc”. Moreover, as noted earlier, the *Bhagavad-Gītā* draws much of its material from the Upaniṣads, and we saw forerunners of the monistic tendencies of these works even in the Vedas. As I also noted, the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* draws much of its material from these earlier traditions—and indeed, both of the Sanskrit phrases cited above from this work, *satyasya satya*, and *eka evādvītiyo* hark back to upaniṣadic descriptions of *ātman/brahman*⁵¹.

But the epic authors were not the only ones to draw upon the Upaniṣads—significantly for our focus in this chapter, various schools of philosophical interpretation presented systematic (enumerating, categorizing etc.) exegeses of these works—and, in the process, they elaborated upon the concept of *ātman/brahman* itself. This concept, as Agehananda Bharati (1981b) puts it:

is defined in later days as *satyam-sivam-sundaram*, that which is true, existent - *sivam*, which is benevolent, and *sundaram*, which is “beautiful” - that’s adjectival. The nominal classification is called *sat chit ananda*. It exists ontologically, it’s “chit,” it exists mainly as consciousness, and it’s “ananda,” it’s bliss. i.e., “being-awareness-bliss.” But these are late, they’re post-upanishadic, the first mention of *sat chit ananda* you find is lit [sic] a commentary on the Bhagavad Gita in the 13th century....

And these ideas too find their way into Sathya Sai Baba’s persona—he describes himself as ‘*Sath-Chith-Aanandha* (Being-Awareness-Bliss Absolute)... Truth, Goodness and Beauty’⁵², and his official biography is titled ‘*Sathyam Sivam Sundaram*’.

Indeed, this latter acts as something of a “signature line” for him; two traditional self-descriptive verses that he occasionally recites emphasize this:

<i>Na ‘ham manushyo</i>	I am neither a man
<i>Na cha deva yakshah</i>	nor a god or demon;
<i>Na Brahmachari na gruhi vanaprastha</i>	I am neither a student, a householder, nor retired;
<i>Na Brahmana Kshatriya Vaishya Sudra</i>	Nor am I a Priest, Warrior, Merchant or Pesant.
<i>Aham Sathyabodhakah</i>	I am the Teacher of Truth;
<i>Sathyam Sivam Sundaram</i>	I am Truth, Goodness and Beauty. ⁵³
<i>Na Punyam Na Papam Na Saukhyam Na Dukkham</i>	Not merit not sin; not pleasures not pain;
<i>Na Manthra Na Tirtham</i>	Not mantras not sacred places;
<i>Na Veda Na Yajnam</i>	Not scriptures not rituals;

⁵¹ See *Bṛhadāranyaka-Upaniṣad* 2:3.6 and *Chāndogya-Upaniṣad* 6:2.1 respectively.

⁵² Sathya Sai Baba (23-11-1975) S13 19:114

⁵³ My translation, based on: <http://www.sssbpt.org/Pages/Specially/DivineLips1.htm> [15-11-2006]; cf. Sathya Sai Baba (6-3-1970) S10 7:33.

Aham Bhojanam Na Bhojanam Naiva Bhojam
Na Kartau
Sadananda Rupam Advaitam
Sathyam Sivam Sundaram

I am neither the eaten nor the eater
 nor the eating of food.
 I am the ever blissful non-dual form;
 Truth, Goodness and Beauty.⁵⁴

The first of these verses is perhaps based upon an aphorism attributed to the Buddha, but it has long been used in “Hindu” contexts. It is occasionally cited, for example, by two of the principal avatars of a thirteenth century Maharashtrian devotional sect—the “Mahānubhāva” (“Great Experience”)—of whom I will have a little to say later; for now, I will only note that the final two lines of Sathya Sai Baba’s verse do not occur in the Mahānubhāva version⁵⁵, perhaps being a later interpolation, or perhaps added by Sathya Sai Baba himself to personalize this verse, in keeping with his above-noted affinity for the traditional triad *satyam śivam sūndaram*. And the case is similar with the second verse above—the first four lines of this verse are identical to a traditional *advaita* verse attributed to Śaṅkara⁵⁶—the remainder are presumably (from the citation of *satyam śivam sūndaram*—as dated by Bharati above) a later *advaita* development, although probably not, in this case, originating with Sathya Sai Baba⁵⁷. But, whatever their origins, these verses give a good indication of the major distinction between what I have been calling “monism” and “non-dualism”—viz. the negative phraseology favoured by the latter. I will explicate this in the next section; we have seen in this section that Sathya Sai Baba draws upon a mixture of rational and traditional authority in referencing many traditional avatar typologies and/or technical terms.

⁵⁴ My translation, based on: <http://www.saibaba.ws/prayers/napunyam.htm> [15-11-2006]

⁵⁵ See Anne Feldhaus (1984), p.26; (1992), pp.26-27.

⁵⁶ This is a verse from Śaṅkara’s *Ātma-śatakam* (a.k.a. *Nirvāṇa-śatakam*)—see, e.g., http://www.sankaracharya.org/nirvana_shatkam.php [18-11-2006]. NB I do not wish to enter into the complex academic debate as to which of the multitudinous works attributed to Śaṅkara were *really* written by him. This distinction does not seem to be important for my purposes, for—whilst, as we will see, Sathya Sai Baba does sometimes deride later *advaita* interpreters of Śaṅkara’s ideas ((6-9-1996) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/d960906.html> [23-11-2006]) and does seem to hold Śaṅkara in a position of unique reverence (p.244)—he does not, to my knowledge, make any reference to the “genuineness” or otherwise of works attributed to Śaṅkara (or to anyone else for that matter—he focuses upon ideas rather than persons).

⁵⁷ I have been unable to locate the origin of this modified verse, but a close variation upon Sathya Sai Baba’s version here occurs, for example, in modern devotions to Ramana Maharshi (1897-1950)—see http://www.advaita.cz/upload.cs/o/od9f8344bhadzany_a_mantry_2.pdf [15-11-2006].

4.3 Avatars & Advaita

The Universal Absolute, the Birthless, Formless,
Unmanifest, Infinite, took on limitations of Name and Form,
and concretised Itself as Avathars (Incarnations) on many occasions....¹

The above quotation presents another example of what we have seen to be Sathya Sai Baba's affinity for monistic strains of traditional thought. The passage comes from his retelling of the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, and indeed, as we have seen, the "original" (Sanskrit²) *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* does show much in the way of monistic (and explicitly non-dualistic) ideas. To give some examples relevant to the passage here: *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 10:10.29 hails Kṛṣṇa as the 'Supreme Brahman in human form'; 10:14.5 as the 'Infinite Lord'; 10:74.21 describes Kṛṣṇa as 'One without a second' [*eka evādvītiyo*]; 1:3.30 calls him the 'formless Lord'; 10:85.20 has him 'unborn' yet assuming 'various forms [*tanu*]'; and 10:14.23 identifies him as the 'only one Self (*ātman*)'³. Amongst these, the proclamations of 'One without a second' and 'only one Self' highlight the "negative theology" that I mentioned at the end of the previous section as being characteristic of "non-dualism".

But this type of thinking is common in mysticism in general, and I would note that the categories negated in the two verses cited at the end of the previous section make for a broadly representative coverage of the mainstays of exoteric "Hinduism"—again, this rejection of the "mainstream" is a typical mystical ploy. Nevertheless, as Anne Feldhaus (1984:26) observes in regard to the first of these verses, this is also a theological proclamation of the 'transcendent otherness' of God—akin to the *līlās* of Kṛṣṇa (discussed earlier, p.216)—hence, it is the negation, rather than the negated, that is of most import. Michael Sells (1994:207) shows that mystics commonly even negate their own proclamations—for the mys-

¹ Sathya Sai Baba, BV 28:178-179

² NB Sathya Sai Baba, presumably, is drawing more upon the Telugu version of this work by Potana (1450-1510 CE), but David Shulman (1993:123) writes that whilst, in aesthetic and socio-psychological terms, 'Potana's verses breathe a rather different spirit from that of the Sanskrit original', 'actual changes in the narrative structure, including the detailed progression of most individual narrative episodes, are relatively minimal; in retelling the stories, he has, on the whole, stuck closely to his Sanskrit text, often to the point of quoting whole phrases verbatim in the form of long Sanskrit compounds transposed, with the sole addition of a Telugu ending, to the Telugu verses'. It is thus possible that the parallels that I have drawn and will further draw between the Sanskrit version of this work and Sathya Sai Baba's teachings are due to his knowledge of Potana's version. Certainly, he speaks highly of this version—claiming, for example that a particular (mantric) 'process of worship [of Śiva] is best described by Pothana in the Bhagavatha he has rendered in Telugu' [(18-9-1985) S18 21:126]. Lack of an English translation of Potana's work precludes further enquiry into this on my part, suffice it to note that this is a potentially fertile field for further investigation.

³ Tagare (1978), 4:pp.1312,1340,1719; Tagare (1976), 1:p.29; Tagare (1978), 4:pp.1790,1345.

tical spiritual absolute ‘transcends all names and referential delimitation’, but:

The habits of language pull the writer and reader [or speaker and listener] toward reifying the last proposition as a meaningful utterance. To prevent such reification, ever-new correcting propositions must be advanced.

We have perhaps already seen something of this in Sathya Sai Baba’s case with his denial of “God descending on earth”, and we will see some similar cases shortly.

I will begin by noting that he sometimes takes issue even with some of the most famous upaniṣadic statements that are put to the service of *advaita*:

Declarations like “*Aham Brahmaasmi*” and “*Tath-thvam-Asi*” are cited as pronouncements proclaiming nondualism. But this is not correct. These statements themselves refer to two entities—*Aham* and *Brahma*; *Tath* and *Thvam* (‘I’ and the Absolute; That and You). The recognition that the one and same *Aathma* dwells in all beings is true *Adhvaitha*.⁴

Similarly, he turns upon at least the first of the traditional triads of “technical” qualities of the absolute that we noted in the previous section:

The pandits describe the Supreme as *Sat-Chit-Ananda* (Being-Awareness-Bliss). This is not correct. He is *Sat*, He is *Chit* and He is *Ananda*. These are not three different qualities of the Divine.⁵

But this is not simply “unsaying” (a term coined by Sells to refer to this phenomenon); both charismatic and rational authority are being invoked here (and in the above cases) in support of a definite *doctrine* of non-duality, of non-difference (*abheda*, see below), a doctrine which is consistently asserted in *advaita* traditions.

To give a quirkily illustrative example of this, in response to the question: ‘Who is Sai Baba?’—posted on the “alt.hindu” internet forum—pro-Sai internet activist Bon Giovanni, evidently picking up on this theme in Sathya Sai Baba’s self-presentation of his identity, writes: ‘Sai is not Christ, not Maitreya, not Sam the Deli man, not your aunt Marth, not this not that, neti neti neti’⁶. “*Neti neti*”—“not this”, “not this” (another phrase of upaniṣadic coinage), is one of the most prominent dicta of Śaṅkara’s school of *advaita*⁷, and whilst Sathya Sai Baba himself seldom invokes this dictum, he is clearly aware of its basic sense:

Even the great sages, after all their enquiries and explorations, could only say about the Divine: “Not this,” “Not this.” They could not define what *It* is. It is possible to say what *It* is not, but who has the capacity to declare what *It* is?

⁴ (21-5-1993) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume26/sss26-19.pdf> [12-7-2007]

⁵ (29-5-1990) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume23/sss23-19.pdf> [12-7-2007]

⁶ http://www.hindunet.org/alt_hindu/1995_Jan/msg00039.html [19-11-2006]

⁷ See, e.g., Potter (1981), p.54.

Or, again, in the specific context of a philosophy of identity, he says:

realisation must come through the Vedantic process of exclusion (“*Nethi, nethi*” “not this, not this”). “I am not the body. I am not the intellect. I am not the Will. I am not the *Antha Karana*, the inner instrument.” All these are only instruments. Man should realise: “I am the Master of all of them.” When by this process of elimination man realises his true Self, he is freed from sorrow.⁸

In this, a traditional anthropological/psychological theory of the constituents of a person, serves as an *arthavāda* to point to the “true Self” (i.e. *ātmā*).

Sathya Sai Baba certainly presents himself as an exemplar of someone who has undergone this process and done away with all identities—excepting the *ātmā*:

my nature is distinct; I do not identify with anything. Those who have neither authority nor adeptness have to hear, study, analyse and judge. Authority is the right of the *Aathma* alone. It is the *Aathma* that can command [(20-10-1961) S2 17:81].

In practical terms, Sathya Sai Baba goes on to aver, this means that his devotees should accept the fact that he may sometimes address them in harsh terms—for: ‘Good and bad, right and wrong, are two sides of the same coin’. Furthermore, he tells his devotees in this context: ‘the purity of feeling is important, not the depth of your scholarship’. And, interestingly, these parallel the most prominent implications of the Mahānubhāva verse cited in the previous section—Feldhaus (1984:26) writes of Guṇḍam Rāṭṭi (and other Mahānubhāva avatars):

It is because he is Parameśvara that he need not be nice, polite, serious, or even sane. ...These leaders taught the primacy of an interior, personal relation with God, a relation to which temples, images, rituals, learning, caste, sex, and ritual purity were at best irrelevant, and from which they were at worst distracting.

Even Śaṅkara, traditionally lauded as a paragon of rationality, is popularly believed to have made a similar point—most famously in the *Bhaja-Govindam*, a devotional hymn (said to be co-authored by his disciples) which denigrates (worldly) scholarship. And Sathya Sai Baba sometimes cites⁹ (and/or recites¹⁰) this work—in fact giving a series of thirty-odd discourses upon it (one on each verse) at one of his “Summer School” courses (SSB 1973). Similarly, the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*—a work with which Sathya Sai Baba is obviously very familiar (enough so to write his own version of it)—holds, as Christof (2001:70) writes, that: ‘Correct *bhakti* behaviour is important, more so than notions of the *varṇāśramadharma* [caste and life-stage duties]’, and that this *bhakti* is ‘a means for reaching liberation in terms of self-

⁸ (1-1-1992) <http://www.ssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume25/ss25-01.pdf> [12-7-2007]

⁹ <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/d960907.html> [12-7-2007]

¹⁰ <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/d960906.html> [12-7-2007]

realization or knowledge of one's being identical with brahman'. I will return to the theme of the overlap between *advaita* and *bhakti* in the next section—for now, I will focus upon the relationship of Sathya Sai Baba's teachings to more strictly philosophical aspects of *advaita*.

Interestingly, in light of the parallels noted at the beginning of this section between *advaita* identity statements in Sathya Sai Baba's divine persona and those in Kṛṣṇa's persona in the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, Sheridan (1986) argues that the philosophy of this particular work evinces some major differences from the *advaita* of Śaṅkara (with which we have thus far aligned Sathya Sai Baba). Sheridan (1986:69) writes that the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 'describes Kṛṣṇa from a difference-in-identity (*bhedābheda*) viewpoint. He is non-dual with qualifications (*saviśeṣādvaita*)'. One of the first major propagators of *bhedābheda* philosophy was Rāmānuja (11th century CE)—one of Śaṅkara's major traditional critics—who, as Parrinder (1970:54) notes, termed his teachings 'qualified non-dualism' (*viśiṣṭādvaita*). In Rāmānuja's view: 'The soul stands in a relationship of 'difference-non-difference' (*bhedābheda*) to Brahman, in so far as it is a 'part' (*aṁśa*) of Brahman', but 'The Brahman to be reached by the meditating devotee must be something different from him'. Sheridan (1986:140-141) does, however, conclude that in the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, this viewpoint is only "implicit"; 'explicitly', he says, it is an '*advaita*' work—indeed, the term *bhedābheda* does not occur at all in the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, although it is common in commentaries on this work¹¹.

Significantly, despite what we have seen to be his strong inclusivistic propensities, Sathya Sai Baba too does not employ the term *bhedābheda* in his teachings; indeed, generally speaking, his views are at odds with those of Rāmānuja and his school of interpretation¹². And Sathya Sai Baba's teachings similarly differ from those of most of the subsequent major traditional schools of interpretation. As Parrinder (1970:82) notes, Nimbārka (12th century CE), like Rāmānuja, taught a form of *bhedābheda* (termed "*dvaitādvaita*"), and, as Sheridan (1986:118) notes, the followers of Caitanya (15th-16th century CE onwards) taught another variation upon this theme—an 'ineffable difference-in-identity (*acintyabhedābheda*) theology'. Once again, Sathya Sai Baba makes no use of the key Sanskrit terms here.

¹¹ NB As Sheridan (1986:7,118) notes, Rāmānuja wrote no commentary on the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, but his followers did, and the followers of Caitanya apply this type of understanding to this work.

¹² Sathya Sai Baba does, however, give some brief inclusivistic overviews of some of the more practical (devotional) aspects of the teachings of Rāmānuja and the other figures I have mentioned—see: (1-1-1996) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/d96o1o1.html> [12-7-2007]; (28-8-1985) S18 18:100.

After Nimbārka, the next major traditional philosopher was Madhva (13th century CE), who propagated a theological dualism (*dvaita*), in which, as Parrinder (1970:58) writes:

though the souls [of ordinary individuals] are parts of God, they are not parts in the same sense as the Avatars are parts of God. The Avatars are parts of the essential nature of God (*svarūpāṁśa*), whereas the souls though parts are different from the essential nature, and are reflections of God.

Again the distinctive term here, *svarūpāṁśa*, does not feature in Sathya Sai Baba's vocabulary, and another of Madhva's key "technical" terms, noted by Sheridan (1986:119-123), is a similar case: *bhedajñāna*—(salvific) "knowledge of difference" ('between God, the individual selves, and the world')—an idea obviously antithetical to *advaita*¹³. We did encounter a close parallel between one aspect of Madhva's interpretation of the avatars and Sathya Sai Baba's ideas earlier, but noted once again that Sathya Sai Baba gave this an *advaita* twist (p.228).

Another variation on *bhedābheda* interpretations, as Sheridan (1986:123) writes, is the 'pure non-dualism (*śuddhādvaita*) or path of grace of Vallabha (1479-1531)', but, again, the details of this particular philosophy find little echo in Sathya Sai Baba's ideas. Sathya Sai Baba makes no use, for example, of Vallabha's most distinctive technical term: *puṣṭi* ("grace"—of various specific kinds), and (as we have already seen, and will further see) he makes much use of the concept of *māyā*—to which, as Sheridan (1986:123) notes, Vallabha shows 'complete antagonism'¹⁴. Indeed, as we will see, in terms of doctrine at least, rather than the "cluttered eclecticism" by which Babb (1986:172) characterises Sathya Sai Baba's views, the *advaita* of Śaṅkara, which, as Sheridan (1986:124) notes, later tradition would term *kevalādvaita* (also, or alternatively, *abheda*, or *nirviśeṣa advaita*)—'absolute non-dualism'—seems to hold pride of place in Sathya Sai Baba's teachings. Not that Sathya Sai Baba specifically aligns himself with any group bearing any of these last names, but we have seen that he makes much reference to Śaṅkara and that he does explicitly use the term '*advaita*'. Moreover, his views (as we have seen) are in line with a traditional *advaita* aphorism that he sometimes recites: "*Abheda Darshanam Jnanam*" (experience of oneness is true wisdom)¹⁵, which

¹³ NB For a succinct illustration of the general philosophical differences between the key ideas of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Madhva see: Sharma (2000), pp.176-179; George (1997), pp.75-81.

¹⁴ NB See Sheridan (1986:123-129) for a concise overview of Vallabha's theology (and George, *op. cit.*—who also outlines the views of Nimbārka and Caitanya).

¹⁵ (25-8-1999) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/d990825.html> [1-6-2007] NB This aphorism occurs in the *Skanda-Upaniṣad* (<http://www.bharatrekhainamerica.com/downloads.htm> [1-6-2007]).

does invoke one of the key terms just cited.

As Parrinder (1970:61) notes, there is an obvious (potential) paradox between *advaita* and the avatars. He cites a conclusion by K.S.Murty to the effect that ‘Śankara’s whole teaching of non-dualism ‘breaks on the rocks of the theory of incarnation’’, and points out that ‘in a logically monistic system there is no room for either Īśvara or Avatar, any more than for worship or prayer’¹⁶. But, as we have already seen, both Sathya Sai Baba and Śaṅkara embrace the latter of these paradoxes, and we will see that the former similarly presents no great obstacle to them. In fact, there is a sense in which even some of the earlier avatar traditions thrive on this paradox—the quote from Sathya Sai Baba at the head of this section recalls *Bhagavad-Gītā* 4:6, a verse that I discussed in this regard in the previous chapter (p.202 above). Nevertheless, systematic philosophical accounts of the avatars, with their focus upon logic and consistency, tend to problematize paradox.

Indeed, as Parrinder (1970:50) notes, Śaṅkara, in his commentary on *Bhagavad-Gītā* 4:6 (the “paradoxical” passage just mentioned) emphasizes the connotations of “illusion” associated with the term *māyā*—to the extent of describing the ‘birth’ of the ‘unborn’ Lord as illusory—holding that he merely ‘appears to the world ‘as though’ he were embodied’:

In the cardinal passage (*Gītā* 4, 6-8) Śaṅkara comments, ‘Though I am unborn, though by nature my power of vision (*jñāna-sakti* [sic]) is undecaying, yet ruling over by nature, the *māyā* of Vishnu . . . by which deluded the whole world knows not Vāsudeva [Kṛṣṇa], its own Self—I appear to be born and embodied, through my own *māyā*, and not in reality, unlike others.’

We saw earlier that the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* also echoes such views—and, as I noted then, such attributions of a sense of “unreality” to the avatar raise important issues that have significant echoes in Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings. I will, however, treat of these in a later chapter (Section 6.2 below).

Focussing for now upon other aspects of this passage, we may note that this is not just inclusivism, but a synthesis—an interpretation of tradition so as to fall in line with preconceived philosophical ideas, with a view to its inclusion within the same¹⁷. It is also an interiorization and spiritualization of tradition—for the primarily theological idea of the unchanging self (*avyayātmā*) of the avatar in *Bhagavad-Gītā* 4:6 (paraphrased by Parrinder earlier) becomes the personal philosophi-

¹⁶ NB Sathya Sai Baba too sometimes recognizes this—at least in a rhetorical context—saying that ‘Advaita did not encourage or inspire devotion to a Personal God’ [(28-8-1985) S18 18:100].

¹⁷ I.e. this is “*advaitic imperialism*”—see p.258 below.

cal virtue of “undecaying vision” [“knowledge” being a more usual translation], and the *advaitin* ‘own Self’ (*svaṃ ātmānam*) is emphasized over the Sāṃkhyan material nature (*prakṛtiṃ svām*) of the original. And Sathya Sai Baba’s views on this *Bhagavad-Gītā* verse are in general accord with this understanding—he says:

Prompted by human consciousness, you may erroneously consider Me an ordinary man. I am teaching you this wisdom in order to remove this illusion created by your human consciousness and to strengthen your Divine consciousness [B 53].

Moreover, elsewhere, Sathya Sai Baba makes it clear that he overwhelmingly favours Śaṅkara’s interpretation of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* as a whole:

The Geetha has as many commentaries written on it as there are hairs on My Head! Yellappa’s commentary attempts to distort the Geetha into a Yellappa Geetha while Mallappa, by his commentary, proves that it is a Mallappa Geetha and nothing else. Everyone forgets it is “*Bhagavadh*” [sic] Geetha, the Geetha that Krishna taught.... What was Arjuna’s condition and how did Krishna cure it?---that question has been tackled only by the commentary of Shankaraachaarya [(24-11-1962) S2 50:278].

Here, then, importantly, Sathya Sai Baba explicitly states his preference for the ideas of Śaṅkara—confirmation of what we have already seen and suggested to be his alignment with this figure.

More to this effect, we may note that Sathya Sai Baba’s views accord with those of Śaṅkara on *Bhagavad-Gītā* 4:8 (cited p.195 above), another verse presenting key aspects of the avatar concept. As Parrinder (1970:51) notes, Śaṅkara comments on the passage describing the avatars’ purpose as the ‘protection of the virtuous... destruction of the wicked... establishment of Right [*dharma*]’ to the effect that ‘the Avatar came ‘for the preservation of earthly Brahman, of spiritual life on earth’ ...generally taken to mean scriptures and sacrifices’. And there are strong echoes of this in Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings—he explicitly connects his declared task of ‘Preservation of the Vedas’¹⁸ with the purpose of the avatar and with his own avatar identity: ‘*Dharmarakshana* (protection of virtue) [i.e. the task of Kṛṣṇa as defined in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*] and *Vedharakshana* (protection of *vedhic* culture) are both practically the same’¹⁹. Sathya Sai Baba is evidently also drawing here upon a traditional aphoristic definition of *dharma*, which he quotes in this context: ‘*Vedhokhilo Dharma muulam*’²⁰. This harks back to *Mānava-Dharma-Śāstra* 2:6—as Olivelle (2004:23) translates: ‘The root of the Law [*dharma*] is the entire Veda’—a verse that goes on to include under the purview of *dharma* ‘the tradition and prac-

¹⁸ Sathya Sai Baba (1-10-1962) S2 41:240

¹⁹ Sathya Sai Baba (25-1-1963) S3 1:9-10

²⁰ Sathya Sai Baba (1-10-1962) S2 41:237

tice of those who know the Veda'. And Śaṅkara, likewise, is perhaps drawing upon such ideas—certainly, for him, the *śruti* (revealed works) and 'those who know the tradition'²¹ (i.e. *smṛti*) are commonly cited loci of authority.

As Suthren Hirst (2005:87) notes, Śaṅkara finds much support for his non-dualistic ideology in upaniṣadic assertions like: “‘There is no diversity here at all’... ‘One only without a second’ ...for this infinite being is unattached’, and Sathya Sai Baba also, evidently draws upon such assertions—saying, for example:

Ignore the temporary and trivial Name and Form of the embodiment of the Divine spirit; then, all distinctions of worm and wolf, of atom and *Avathaar*, disappear and the knowledge that basic Truth is One is realised [S10 36:242 (11-1970)].

This is presumably an echo of *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1:3:22—which, as Dandekar (1979:47) translates, proclaims that:

(The essential self or the vital essence in man, *ātman*), is the same as that in ant, the same as that in gnat, the same as that in elephant, the same as that in these three worlds, indeed, the same as that in the whole universe.

And Sathya Sai Baba's reference to 'Name and Form' in the above—the like of which is quite common in his teachings—is presumably a translation of the Sanskrit term *nāmarūpa* (or its Telugu equivalent), something which perhaps further aligns him with Śaṅkara, for, as Hacker (1995:67,68) notes: 'The frequent occurrence of the word *nāmarūpa* is a characteristic of Ś[āṅkara]'s language'.

As Hacker observes, Śaṅkara bases this concept on a couple of uses of this term in the *Chāndogya-Upaniṣad* which he interprets to connote 'a kind of prime matter or primal state of the world'. But, as Hacker also notes, Śaṅkara (also) uses it in the sense [given by Sathya Sai Baba above] of 'the phenomenal world', a sense which, as Hacker goes on to show, is in any case to a large extent entailed by the primary sense just mentioned—i.e. the dual sense of *prakṛti* in Sāṃkhya that we encountered earlier (see p.165,n.17 above). As Hacker (1995:70) writes, Śaṅkara held that 'Everyday, empirical existence (*vyavahāra*²²) functions on the basis of name and form', and that 'Name and form are attributed to Brahman for the purpose of meditative worship'. And the avatar seems to be something of a special case of this. Suthren Hirst (1984:240) states:

²¹ Suthren Hirst (2005:82), citing Śaṅkara, *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-Bhāṣya* 2.1.20.

²² NB “*Vyavahāra*” is a technical term in Śaṅkara's teachings, and Sathya Sai Baba also sometimes uses this term—taking it very much in its meaning here of 'truth for all practical worldly purposes' [(31-12-1984) S17 31:194]. Śaṅkara generally opposes this to what he designates as the higher, spiritual truth (*paramārtha*—see, e.g., *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-Bhāṣya* 3:5.1, Potter 1984:197), and Sathya Sai Baba also employs this distinction, explicating it in classic *advaita* fashion—using the well-known “rope-snake” analogy [(24-12-1980) S14 60:389]—cf. Potter (1984), pp.81-83.

It is the identity of the teacher as well as his teaching that is important.... Kṛṣṇa, as the supreme reality, termed not only Vāsudeva, but parabrahman, is a bodily representation of this fact.

As Suthren Hirst (2005:122) notes, for Śaṅkara: ‘The Lord is part of the context of the teaching not just as a single aspect of name and form, but as its very basis’, and she indicates that ideas of the avatar play a role in Śaṅkara’s teachings akin to the “reversible structures” of the *arthavādas* that we saw earlier in relation to the *vyūhas* and *guṇas* (p.162 above).

Thus, Suthren Hirst (2005:124) writes that, in Śaṅkara’s view:

It is necessary to progress from an understanding of Lord as cause and thus as context for the whole world and teaching, through an understanding that such a Lord, if viewed over and against oneself, is only part of the context of name and form, to a final understanding of Lord as the self, once more transcendent to name and form.

In particular, as applied by Śaṅkara to the Kṛṣṇa of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, Suthren Hirst (1984:242,243) writes:

The figure of Kṛṣṇa demonstrates this transcendence of samsāra [the conventional world] in three ways. Firstly, he demonstrates it in his own nature.... This is his unwaning power to know [cf. p.243 above].... Secondly, this nature is manifested in his attitude to his own agency. His unclouded potential for knowing enables him to realise actions for what they are. He can thus act with no motive of his own..., but simply for the protection of the world. The avatāra’s action is exemplary of a proper attitude.... Thirdly, in his teaching, Kṛṣṇa displays his realisation of the Advaitin truth. He represents not only the transcendent aspect of the eternally free Brahman, but the man who has seen within himself the clue to the nature of the fundamental identity of that transcendent with the immanent self in all.

And much of this resonates with Sathya Sai Baba’s understandings, both as applied to himself and to other avatars. We saw earlier his claims to extraordinary possession of knowledge and his identity statements made in terms according with his “realization of the Advaitin truth”, and we may note here that he presents his agency as distinctive in terms akin to the above:

My life is a commentary on my message. ...I am active and busy all the twenty-four hours or the day. ...And, all this I do, not for personal gain, but only because I have come for your sake. I never seek another’s help; I offer help, never receive it. My hand always gives; it never takes [(11-10-1970) S10 30:185].

He does this, what’s more, shortly after declaring himself to be ‘the Truth of Truths (*Sathyasya Sathyam*)’—the phrase we saw earlier as an example of the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*’s adoption (in application to Kṛṣṇa) of upaniṣadic monism. And he follows this by explicitly attesting to the didactic nature of his descent: ‘This Form has been assumed in order to lead mankind from untruth to Truth’.

Thus, for Sathya Sai Baba too, the avatar serves a definite pedagogical purpose. More to this effect, and in keeping with the above, he says:

You cannot discard Name and Form until you transmute yourself into the Nameless and Formless.... That is the reason why the Nameless and Formless has often to assume Name and Form, and come before humanity with limitations imposed by its own Will, so that it may be loved, respected, worshipped, listened to and followed; so that the purpose of humanity may be fulfilled [(4-3-1962) S2 31:165].

Furthermore, for him, as for Śaṅkara, the lesson thus imparted is non-dualistic:

It is not possible to worship the Formless Absolute. Hence, the *Rama-Avatar* appeared in human form to enable humanity to experience the Formless in a form which is accessible to them and helpful to them. An *Avatar* assumes the form that is beneficial to and within the reach of human beings. ...The *Avatars* come to teach humanity this principle of oneness so that they may get rid of the idea of diversity and manifest their inherent divinity, realizing their basic spiritual nature.²³

The avatar is thus portrayed as a stepping-stone for devotees enroute to *advaitin* realisation (“getting rid of the idea of diversity”) and is thus something of an *arthavāda*—although Sathya Sai Baba does not go so far as to suggest that the avatar is “just an idea”. Even for Śaṅkara, the avatar is clearly more than a mere idea, but nevertheless, is certainly to be understood first and foremost as pointing towards the transcendent realm.

We have seen, then, that some of Sathya Sai Baba’s views accord closely with traditional *advaita* understandings. Whilst, as we have also seen, Sathya Sai Baba is often broadly inclusivistic in his views, this too, as we will see in the next section, is perhaps a reflection of his general *advaita* orientation, for the type of inclusivism that he usually seems to employ evinces a close relationship to *advaita*, perhaps even (originally) deriving directly from *advaita* ways of thinking.

²³ Sathya Sai Baba (24-3-1991) S24 5:55-57

4.4 Oneness & Other Faiths

Really speaking, there is no other system or faith. All religions, all faiths are but phases or facets of the same Universal Faith and Discipline. ...The *Aathma* is one, but, each one sees a fraction and judges it differently.¹

As Halbfass (1988:411) notes, Hacker ‘suggests a deep affinity between non-dualism and inclusivism’, and whilst Halbfass shows that there are some problems with Hacker citing Śaṅkara as an exemplar in this regard, in some cases at least—as Sathya Sai Baba’s statement at top indicates—there is an ‘affinity’ to be seen here. I would note, however, that *advaita* was often a subject, rather than just an instrument of inclusivism. Halbfass (1988:405) cites one of Hacker’s references to another aspect of inclusivism to which I have thus far made little explicit reference: ‘affiliating the foreign with what is one’s own by way of subordination’, and this is evident in devotional appropriations of non-dualistic or monistic ideas.

Thus, *Bhagavad-Gītā* 12 portrays the path of devotion to the avatar as superior to worshipping the “imperishable, unmanifest”, absolute, and Sheridan (1986:73) writes that, in the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*: ‘Devotion, because it keeps Bhagavān always in view transcends liberation (*mukti*) [i.e. the goal of *advaita*]’. Parrinder (1970:66-68) cites the influential Hindi version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*—the “Holy Lake of the Acts of Rāma” (*Rāma-charita-mānasa*), written by Tulsī Dās (1543-1623)—as similarly subordinating advaitic impersonalism to a personal devotionism:

‘Let those who contemplate the Absolute speak of It and know It; we, O Lord, hymn thy glory unceasingly as personal’ ...at the end the emphasis is upon simple faith and repetition of the divine Name.

Knowledge of the ‘Absolute’ is thus subordinated to devotion (*bhakti*), but, in this work, Rāma, as the avatar of the ‘Absolute’, provides the focus for this *bhakti*:

Rāma is called Lord Hari (Vishnu), Hari in human form, the Supreme Spirit who has taken bodily form ‘simply to do his faithful servants good, a Lord of perfect grace who loves his suppliant people’. He took the form of man and ‘endured suffering to make the good happy’. ...the impersonal and invisible becomes personal for love of his devotees. Rāma, ‘as all the world knows’, is the Absolute everlasting God.

The last-cited point here recalls Sathya Sai Baba’s proclamation that we saw at the end of the previous section, which, indeed, specifically mentioned Rāma.

Notably, Hacker (1995:244-245) himself especially cites the *Rāma-charita-mānasa* as an example of inclusivism, further pointing out that this work manages to include devotion to Śiva within its purview by subordinating this figure to Rāma

¹ Sathya Sai Baba (1966) S6 44:223

as his ‘foremost and noblest worshipper’. But subordination does not always come to the fore in such traditions; sometimes there is more of the “synthesis,” (or perhaps better, syncretism) that we noted in relation to the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. Brockington (1998:493-494) writes that:

the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* [c.6th-11th century CE], which claims in its present form to be by Vālmīki, ...expounds a basically Advaita Vedāntin viewpoint (though one deeply influenced by Buddhist idealism).... Though a sophisticated Sanskrit literary work, it thus has elements with a wider appeal, for it represents a unique blend of abstract philosophy and vivid narrative.... ...This linking of Advaita Vedānta with *bhakti* is even more apparent in the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* [c.14th century CE], which teaches a form of Advaita combined with belief in Rāma’s saving grace.... in its retelling of the Rāma story, it considerably abridges it and frequently interrupts the plot with philosophical passages.

Brockington construes the presence of *advaita* ideas in these traditions as ‘the attempt by the *bhakti* movement to enhance its status by adopting Advaitin terminology’—i.e. an appeal by *bhakti* traditions to the traditional and rational-legal authority of *advaita*—and what little reference Sathya Sai Baba makes to the two works just cited exemplifies this. He specifically commends the *Adhyātma* (‘Spiritual’) *Rāmāyaṇa* to his followers², for, he says, this work explains the ‘spiritual significance of the epic’. And he makes use of the narrative premise of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* to provide traditional authority for his life-path as an avatar, saying (as noted earlier) that Rāma underwent a period of withdrawal from the world prior to his teenage years³ similar to such a period in his own life⁴—elsewhere turning this into a sort of rational-legal universal of the avatars, necessary for allowing them time to design a ‘Master Plan’: ‘a stage which all *Avathaars* are in before they enter upon the task for which they have come down’⁵.

Here, we may note a suggestion by Halbfass (1988:414) that there are two basic types of inclusivism. Firstly, he says, there is ‘a horizontally coordinating inclusivism which recognizes other views as parts and aspects of its own totality’. He cites as an exemplar of this traditional Jaina doxographies, which:

present their own system not as the transcending culmination of lower stages of truth, but as the complete and comprehensive context, the full panorama which comprises other doctrines....⁶

² (29-3-1968) <http://www.sssbpt.info/sssbspeaks/volumeo8/ssso8-16.pdf> [28-11-2006]

³ See, e.g.: K. Narayanaswami Aiyer (1971), pp.9-31; Swami Venkatesananda (1985), pp.3ff.

⁴ This is described by Babb (1986), p.163; see also, e.g.: Howard Murphet (1971), p.54; LIMF 447.

⁵ Sathya Sai Baba (25-3-1980) S14 49:315

⁶ NB For more on the Jaina doxographies see Halbfass (1988), pp.266-268.

This is the type of inclusivism in evidence in the passages just cited: epic *bhakti* is horizontally coordinated with *advaita*, providing a comprehensive narrative context in which this latter is allowed to operate; Sathya Sai Baba horizontally coordinates an aspect of his biography with a similar aspect in traditional accounts of Rāma, formulating this into a “comprehensive context” for the avatars, and he recommends the *Adhyātma-Rāmāyaṇa* as (horizontally) compatible with, and (implicitly) comprised within, his teachings.

In contrast to this, are the traditional examples cited at the beginning of this section, in which devotion to Kṛṣṇa and Rāma is seen as a transcending culmination of worship of the advaitic ‘Absolute’. Halbfass describes this as a “vertical,” hierarchical model of inclusivism’, typified, however, not by devotion but by:

the Vedāntic idea of *brahman*... [which] postulates an ascent which is at the same time a discarding and transcendence of doctrinal distinctions; the inclusion and neutralization of other views is not a subordinating identification of specific foreign concepts with specific aspects of one’s own system, but an attempt to supersede and transcend specific concepts and conceptual and doctrinal dichotomies in general.

In the cases we are discussing here, “everything is reduced to Kṛṣṇa” (to use a phrase I cited earlier), and the impersonal absolute is superseded by the personal deity Rāma. It is important to note, however, that it is not “subordination” *per se* that is definitive of “hierarchical inclusivism”, for Halbfass writes that ‘Jainas, too, claim a superior vantage point’. It is, rather, the process of ‘ascent’ through various “other” views towards the goal of transcendence of ‘doctrinal dichotomies in general’. Halbfass (1988:414-415) illustrates this distinction with two traditional metaphors: horizontal inclusivism, by ‘many rivers which are united in one ocean’—‘The ocean extinguishes the individuality of the rivers, but it also preserves them and needs them for its own fullness’; hierarchical inclusivism, by the ‘manner in which the footprints of other creatures disappear in those of the elephant’—‘The footprints of the elephant simply obliterate the other footprints’.

Of course, Hacker himself never posited such a distinction, and Halbfass does note that ‘these two models are not always kept apart in doxographic practice’, but they do seem to have some descriptive utility. Some of the epic treatments of avatars and the typologies of avatars that we saw in the previous chapter exemplify horizontal inclusivism—providing a comprehensive context for the avatars (albeit that these are distinguished as being of different grades), and an example from a context closer to our present concerns can be seen in a summary by Par-

rinder (1970:60) of the views of Jayanta (850-910)⁷—a proponent of the traditional Nyāya (“logic”) school of philosophy:

If other scriptures differ from the Vedas they may agree with some parts of the Vedas which are not known at present, and also the texts of the Buddhists, Jains, and Sāṃkhya may have been given by God in previous Avatars. All scriptures are authoritative... but it is better to say that one God is the author of all scriptures than to posit numbers of beings. All scriptures agree on the need for liberation, and this comes from God.... He knows that not all can follow the same path, and so takes on different bodies, called by such names as Mahāvīra [the principal prophet of Jainism], Buddha, Kapila and so on.

Here, the avatars play a key role, along with traditional ideas of the all-encompassing nature of the Vedas, in which, as Heesterman (1978:83) writes:

the Vedas are indeed unbounded, not limited to a particular time, place or seer. This means that, as a matter of principle, new ideas, doctrines, usages and ‘visions’ cannot be barred from claiming Vedic or Veda-like authority, as indeed has been happening all the time.

Various “alien” religions are thus horizontally coordinated and conceptualised as (independent) parts of the Veda, and of the domain of Nyāya “Hinduism”⁸.

There is little subordination in this, but as I just mentioned, horizontal inclusivism is possible even when subordination of other religions to “Hinduism” is explicit, and this is evident in some of Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings:

The scriptures deal with only one goal but they indicate different paths to reach it. Each path could be a definite religion and its doctrines and disciplines considered different from the rest. So the statement that Rama, Christ, Zoroaster, Buddha, Mohammed, and others are one, is not valid. ...[the] Hindu religion which has come down from the timeless past is really supreme. Other faiths are only based on some doctrines of Hinduism selected by them and developed in accordance with the traditions and culture of their own region. Therefore, Truths inherent in the Hindu faith often appear in those other faiths [SSV 117-118].

Or, again, explicitly defining the avatars (and using a modern metaphor):

Buddha, Christ, Mohammed and others were not Avatars. They had some divine power. Only in India are Avatars born, because only in India are the Sastras understood; and only in India do the sages constantly experiment and practice. It is like in

⁷ NB Hacker (1978:481) and Halbfass (1988:360ff.) also cite Jayanta in the context of inclusivism.

⁸ NB Jayanta, of course, predates the historical formation of an explicit “Hindu” identity (hence the quotation marks), but the fact that he uses the avatars and the Vedas as touchstones evinces a sense of greater commonality with Hindu sects than with Buddhist or Jain ideas (he does not, for example, invoke the concept of former Buddhas or Jinas), and we can perhaps see in this the germs of later (some only a few centuries later—see p.287,n.10 below) ideas of a general and explicitly stated “Hindu” identity. Certainly, as Halbfass (1988:237) describes it, some prominent “neo-Hindus” put (their own interpretation of) other Nyāya traditions to the service of inclusivism.

a gold mine. Where gold is found, there gather the geologists, engineers, and experienced miners. The gold is mined there, and then it is taken all over the world.⁹

Subordination is to the fore here, but this is still horizontal inclusivism—Hinduism is portrayed as superior to these other religions only in that it provides a comprehensive context for them. There is no attempt here to transcend doctrinal distinctions—on the contrary, such attempts are explicitly said to be ‘not valid’. For this reason, and for another that will become apparent shortly, I will refer to “horizontal inclusivism” as “coordinating inclusivism”, and distinguish two modes of this—with and without “subordination”.

I am prompted in this by another scholarly attempt to outline distinct types of inclusivism. Thomas Forsthoefel and Cynthia Humes (2005:8) contrast ‘egalitarian inclusivism’, in which: ‘All [religions] go to the same goal’, and ‘an inclusivism (all religions have value) with an exclusivist subtext (while all religions have value, all find their ultimate meaning and value in Hinduism)’. With some justification, they align Sathya Sai Baba with the second of their types of inclusivism; indeed, in the above, Sathya Sai Baba specifically states that the ‘scriptures deal with only one goal’ but sees all religions as finding their fulfilment in Hinduism—displaying, moreover, a less than egalitarian attitude to other religious leaders. Accordingly, Palmer (2005:105-106), upon whom Forsthoefel and Humes draw, characterizes Sathya Sai Baba’s inclusivism as follows:

While one may mistakenly gather that Satya Sai Baba is sharing a message of universal acceptance, he is, in essence, calling for a return to Vedic religion. With the heart of his audience historically being Hindu, he seldom finds it necessary to mention that the overwhelming majority of stories, images, and lessons he uses in his teaching are drawn from Hindu texts and traditions.

And this fits well with what we have seen throughout this study of Sathya Sai Baba’s extensive use of Hindu traditions, and, more importantly, with what is evident in the two passages quoted on the previous page. This, in my terms, is a coordinating, but subordinating, inclusivism—if we referred to it as “horizontal” inclusivism, there is not only some dissonance with the fact of subordination, but also with the antonym ‘egalitarian’ proposed by Forsthoefel and Humes.

This is further complicated, however, by the fact that Sathya Sai Baba elsewhere explicitly rejects subordination, proclaiming that: ‘Those who profess great love for their particular religion are indulging in make-believe when they assume that their religion is superior to that of others’—insisting, rather, that: ‘Whether in

⁹ C XLIV 121

Hinduism or Buddhism, Jainism or Sikhism, Christianity or Islam, Divinity is One and ONE ONLY'¹⁰. There is still some coordinating inclusivism here with the various religions being homologized, and there is a subtle exclusivist subtext, for his capitalized assertion does not take heed of the fact that several major sects amongst the religions to which he refers do not view divinity in this manner. This could thus still be seen as exemplifying the second of the types proposed by Forsthoefel and Humes—the type with which they align Sathya Sai Baba. But, I would argue, in this we also encroach upon the territory of hierarchical (rather than horizontally coordinating) inclusivism, for the “other” religions are not so much coordinated or even subordinated to a Hindu *advaita* viewpoint as subsumed by it—as the imprints of smaller animals disappear in the footprint of an elephant. In this understanding, as we saw Sathya Sai Baba put it at the head of this section: ‘Really speaking, there is no other system or faith. ...The *Aathma* is one’.

As I noted earlier, Halbfass acknowledges that there is sometimes an overlap between the two types of inclusivism that he posits, and this is perhaps in evidence here, and, whilst Forsthoefel and Humes do not provide a similar disclaimer to their typology, I would suggest that Sathya Sai Baba’s assertion here invokes their other “type” of inclusivism as well—‘egalitarian inclusivism’. They cite Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950) as the paradigm case for this view, and, as Forsthoefel (2005:46) notes, Ramana Maharshi’s inclusivism ‘is entirely in keeping with his non-dual metaphysic; we are the Self; differences are only circumstantial modifications’. The “same goal” of “all religions” is very much an *advaitic* goal (it is not the typical *bhakti* goal of eternally worshipping Kṛṣṇa in heaven, nor is it the (exoteric) Christian or Islamic goal of eternal life in paradise as granted through intercession by Jesus/Mohammed on the day of judgement). And this is a traditional *advaita* understanding¹¹; Halbfass (1988:356) writes:

Even the great Śaṅkarācārya himself explained that what the Vedānta regards as the goal of its desire to know (*jijñāsā*), the *one* Brahman, the *one* Ātman, is also the ultimate intention of the other philosophies....

Of course, the adjectives “hierarchical” and “egalitarian” do not sit well together (even if we were to see the latter as a sub-type—*sans* subordination), and we might question whether there is any justification at all for the latter of these. But

¹⁰ Sathya Sai Baba (25-12-1985) S18 30:188 NB See also SSV 118.

¹¹ NB It is also highlighted in Neo-Hinduism—see, e.g., Arvind Sharma (1979), who discusses this and a number of subtle variations upon it (especially *vis-à-vis* Ramakrishna). Sharma takes a philosophical tack, reifying Hinduism, but does make some interesting points.

Sathya Sai Baba's views indicate that there is, at least up to a point—he writes (in his “retelling” of the Upaniṣads):

Go deeply into the matter you will find that Dwaitha is not opposed to A-Dwaitha. The opposition is between various Dwaithic religions and schools of thought. For the A-Dwaithin, all is Parabrahmah [the supreme absolute] and so he knows no opposition. ...A-dwaitha is the Highest Truth; Dwaitha is a certain mental attitude. ...So, there is no opposition or quarrel between Dwaitha and A-Dwaitha [UV 29-20].

And he is not alone in such views; indeed, he has perhaps been inspired in this by Vivekananda (from whom we have already seen him borrowing, and who himself drew much on traditional *advaita*), who Glyn Richards (1998:216) cites thus:

The Advaitist or qualified Advaitist does not say that dualism is wrong; it is a right view, but a lower one. ...therefore let everyone work out his own vision of this universe, according to his own ideas.

Non-dualism *is*, in a sense, ‘egalitarian’ because it allows other viewpoints freedom to promote their particular attitudes—it bars them only from “the Highest Truth”.

We will see confirmation of this from some traditional Advaita views shortly, but I would suggest that, given the disparate impressions engendered by their names, the terms “hierarchical” and “egalitarian” are unsuitable designations. Halbfass (1988:267) sometimes refers to his “horizontal inclusivism” as “perspectivism”—to which a potential antonym would be “absolutism”, but this does not give the sense of “ascent” that is integral to his definition of “hierarchical inclusivism”. Another possibility would be “*advaita* inclusivism”, but this designation is unsuitable since, as Halbfass (1988:357) points out, ‘the same inclusivistic model could be claimed by and utilized for quite differing positions’ (he gives the example of some Buddhists who view the Advaita goal as a ‘misunderstood’ version of their own spiritual absolute). I will thus refer to this phenomenon as “transcendent inclusivism”, a designation which captures something of the sense of both “hierarchical”—to “transcend” means to *rise* above—and “egalitarian”, for “transcendent” refers to a state that *equally* surpasses all others, being of a different order from them. This will have the added advantage of encapsulating the examples of this type of inclusivism that we encountered earlier—in which: “everything is reduced to Kṛṣṇa” (without there necessarily being any “ascent”—Kṛṣṇa simply transcends all other phenomena in being identified with them) or (it is believed) “devotion transcends liberation because it always keeps Bhagavān in view”. Again, this type of inclusivism can be with or without explicit “subordination”, although other viewpoints are always implicitly subordinated to the transcendent. The first

example that we saw from Sathya Sai Baba above specifically rejected subordination, but subordination is quite patent in the passage just cited—“A-dwaitha is the Highest Truth”.

I would further point out here that “transcendent inclusivism” is also somewhat analogous to Śaṅkara’s interpretation of emanation cosmogonies as *arthavādas* (outlined earlier, pp.161ff.); the content of the traditions that are “included” is not so important as that which they are interpreted as indicating—i.e. the “truth” of *advaita*. Sathya Sai Baba can even assert, as we just saw him do, that he has “no quarrel” with *dvaita*. I cited Halbfass in connection with the first example of an emanation cosmogony that we saw to be taken as an *arthavāda* (p.162), and indeed Halbfass (1988:413-414) goes on from this reference to suggest that:

The inclusivistic neutralization of all doctrines and concepts by subordinating them to the doctrine of pure, absolute being [i.e. transcending subordinating inclusivism], and the reductive explanation of all phenomena by tracing them back to this one being [in the emanation cosmogony cited earlier] cannot be separated. ...The “form” or pattern of thought is basically identical: The phenomena are traced back to the fundamental cosmological principle *sat* in the same manner in which all specific concepts and teachings are reduced to the all-encompassing doctrine of pure being.

And, whatever we might call it, this “form” of thought is certainly in evidence in some of Sathya Sai Baba’s inclusivistic proclamations. For example, he tells his devotees in regard to three of the major traditional schools of philosophy that we discussed in the previous section:

you have to proceed from *Dwaita* (dualism) to *Visishtadvaita* (qualified non-dualism) and to *Advaita* (non-dualism). Without having the *Advaitic* experience you cannot understand the true nature of the *Atma* [(27-9-1987) S20 22:184].

He thus portrays *advaita*, which we have seen to be his own dominant position, as subordinating its major rival philosophical schools, but he also “traces them back to it”. This is an “ascent”, in the terms we saw Halbfass use earlier—the other views progressively point towards the transcendent non-dual *ātmā*.

This idea too perhaps comes to Sathya Sai Baba via Vivekananda, who, as Sarkar (1997:347,n215) notes, spoke of ‘my discovery’ of the idea that: ‘Dvaita, Visisthadvaita [*sic*], and Advaita; one comes after the other’. But, whether or not this particular “discovery” was first made by Vivekananda, this form of interpretation is typical even of traditional *advaita*—in this, as Potter (1981:7-8) writes:

Since all distinctions are the product of ignorance, any positive account of a path to liberation, involving distinctions, must be ultimately false.

...However, some false views are less misleading than others. By criticizing worse

views one arrives by stages at better ones.

...atheism and agnosticism are worse views than theism, again, monotheism is preferable to polytheism; but ultimately preferable to all theisms is monism.

...Or, again, the sceptical or materialist view ...is inferior to those views which accept the authority of scripture; among the latter, those views (Buddhism, Jainism, etc.) which accept as authority scriptures other than the Vedas are inferior to those views which accept the Vedas as authoritative.... Ultimately, however, scripture can provide no positive key to liberation, because the key lies in removing ignorance, a negative step; so the highest view of all is that of *apavāda*, that reality is “not this, not this” (*neti neti*).

The first syllogism here equates with one that Michael Sells (who I cited earlier p.238) proposes in an analysis of mysticism in general—however, it does not *simply* lead, as Sells suggests, to repeated negation of any and every viewpoint (although it does ultimately do this), but rather to progressive criticism of the same. This is what we saw Sathya Sai Baba doing in regard to the traditional monistic aphorisms mentioned in the previous section—in the case of *sat-cit-ānanda* at least, he did not ultimately reject this, but merely interpreted it along (more fully) non-dualistic lines. This type of thinking, summarized in the above outline, is obviously an extremely fertile template for “transcendent inclusivism”.

As I suggested at the beginning of this section, Advaita ideology thus does seem to encourage inclusivism, and there are more examples of this to be found in Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings—he says:

For those who know, [Shirdi] Sai, Rama, Krishna, Vishnu—all are One, the distinction is only in the upadhi¹², the form and the name. The power, the glory, the mission, the message are all the same, though the particular achievements may be different, according to the needs and purposes of the age [(19-8-1964) SSS4 16:98].

By criticizing the “worse” view of these figures as being different—a view which he indicates that some of his devotees hold (he is specifically responding to a question as to why he so seldom mentions Shirdi Sai in his speeches)—he arrives at the advaitic conclusion that all of these figures are “One”. The capitalization is significant; the emphasis here, as in the first example of hierarchical inclusivism that I cited from Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings, is very much upon the “One” to which these figures are understood as pointing, rather than on the figures themselves—

¹² NB This use of the Sanskrit term “upādhi” is typical of advaita—Potter (1981:129-130) gives an instance of Śaṅkara’s use of this term as follows: ‘just as *ākāśa* (space) is limited by adjuncts (*upādhi*) such as jars, caves, etc., but the resulting spaces are not different from *ākāśa*, so the Lord is limited by the body, senses and so on, but the result ...is not different from the Lord’. And Hacker (1995:68) notes that, in pre- and post-Śaṅkara advaita: ‘Quite often the upādhis of the soul, above all the body, are referred to as “made out of name and form”, hence Sathya Sai Baba’s above usage.

this is an *arthavāda*.

This becomes clear as, in Sathya Sai Baba's hands, the Buddha—who famously taught that all is devoid of “self” (*āttā/ātmā*)—becomes an *advaitin*:

Buddha taught that the principle of unity of the *Atma* was the only true principle in the world. One who realised it by using his spiritual intelligence was true *Buddha*, he said. Other than the *Atma*, nothing existed in this world. In this transient and ephemeral world, one thing is true and eternal. That is Divinity. That is what everyone should aspire to attain. *Sathyam Saranam Gachchhami* (I take refuge in truth). *Ekam Saranam Gachchhami* (I take refuge in the principle of oneness).¹³

Traditional views of the Buddha are obliterated in the footprint of *advaita*—in Sathya Sai Baba's interpretation, the “Triple Refuge” of Buddhism¹⁴ becomes a mono-refuge, a refuge in the “truth” of “oneness”¹⁵. Moreover, he goes on to portray the Buddha as achieving [the Hindu goal of] ‘self-realisation’—and this only with the aid of a [Hindu] ‘holy man’ who, he says:

gave him a talisman for protection ...When Siddhartha [the future Buddha] put it around his neck, all his anguish disappeared instantaneously. Till the last moment of his earthly sojourn, Buddha had the talisman around his neck.¹⁶

Similarly, Sathya Sai Baba sometimes encourages his devotees in the popular “New-Age” belief¹⁷ that Jesus spent much time undertaking spiritual practices in South Asia prior to his mission in Palestine—and presents him too as an *advaitin*:

The same principle was stated by Jesus also. He said, “All are one, my dear son, be alike to everyone”. In fact, the underlying principle of all the religions is one and the same. But, the people have forgotten this unity and have become narrow-minded.¹⁸

¹³ (13-5-2006) <http://www.sathyasai.org/discour/2006/do60513.html> [8-11-2006]

¹⁴ I.e. the “confession of faith”: *Buddham śaranam gacchāmi; Dharmam śaranam gacchāmi; Saṅgham śaranam gacchāmi*, “I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Buddhist community”.

¹⁵ NB As Parrinder (1970:62) notes, there are of course legitimate parallels that can be drawn between *advaita* and various Buddhist philosophies (indeed, Śāṅkara's ideas were likely influenced by these), but—at least in regard to the semantics of the term *ātmā*—the two are diametrical opposites.

¹⁶ (13-5-2006) <http://www.sathyasai.org/discour/2006/do60513.html> [8-11-2006]

¹⁷ See, e.g., C XXXII 88; S14 16:109-110 (25-12-1978). NB This is a belief that was made famous by Nicolas Notovich—a late nineteenth century Russian author who claimed, amongst other things, to have found a ‘biography’ of Jesus testifying to this effect in a monastery in Tibet. This ‘biography’, however, is patently spurious, and—despite extensive efforts by Notovich and many subsequent writers—there is, so far as I have been able to ascertain, no credible historical evidence of Jesus having ever left Palestine [see: Paul Pappas (1991); cf. Holger Kersten (1986)].

¹⁸ (12-3-1999) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/d990312pm.html> [5-12-2001] NB Sathya Sai Baba often attributes this saying to Jesus, but, so far as I have been able to ascertain, there is no Christian (or “New Age” or Sūfī—other likely possibilities) tradition, that makes this claim. The Bible (*Mark* 12:29) does have Jesus proclaim that the most important traditional “commandment” is that the God of Israel is One, and I have sometimes come across Neo-Hindu or New-Age interpretations of this as a proclamation of *advaita*, but Sathya Sai Baba makes no reference to this.

Or, again, he cites the Muslim mystic Husain ibn-Mansūr al-Hallāj as uttering the upaniṣadic dictum “*Aham Brahmaasmi*” (I am God)’; whereas, as Parrinder (1970: 199) writes, al-Hallāj was famously ‘executed for heresy (A.D. 922)’ for ‘identification of himself with God’ by ‘assuming a title used of God in the Qur’ān [*Anā ’l-Haqq*, ‘I am Reality’]’. Moreover, Sathya Sai Baba spatially and temporally resituates ‘Mansur’—having him live: ‘ABOUT 400 years ago ...in the city of Benaras’, and having ‘*Vedhic* scholars’, rather than Muslim clerics, condemn his heresy¹⁹.

This is transcendent (or ‘egalitarian’) inclusivism taken to an extreme—and there is perhaps something of an analogy to be had here with the answer to an interesting question that Soifer (1991:4) rhetorically asks:

As a deity with multiple forms, is Viṣṇu in his avatāric forms a mythological expression of a unity-in-diversity theology, or is this just another example of what one Indologist [Jan van Buitenen] wryly called “Vaiṣṇava imperialism”; that is, the taking over of any religious expression or mythological manifestation to view it as derivative of or related to Viṣṇu?

In Chapters 4 and 5, we saw material that would support both of these explanations²⁰, and we have perhaps encountered something akin to both of them in this chapter too—in coordinating inclusivism (with some subordination or “exclusivist subtext”), we saw “Hinduism” interpreted as a point of unity in the diversity of world religions, and in the last few examples that I have described, I would suggest that we are seeing something that could well be called “advaitic imperialism”. Certainly, most Christians and Buddhists would not accept, and would even take offence at, Sathya Sai Baba’s above-cited claims.

It is not simply that Sathya Sai Baba is unaware that these figures were not Hindus (and not *advaitins*). He elsewhere admits that ‘Buddha ...may not have made reference to Veda or used Vedantic terms, nevertheless, he experienced and demonstrated the essential spirit of Veda’²¹, and he shows a reasonable degree of familiarity with the basic life story and teachings of the Buddha²². Similarly, in the

¹⁹ (26-3-1993) S26 12:121ff. NB Al-Hallāj did visit India, but spent most of his time in Bagdad, where he was executed after a prolonged period of imprisonment and accusation at the behest of a vizier. There is some suggestion that he may have been influenced by Indian *advaita* ideas—Zaehner (1960:20), for example, refers to this, as does Parrinder (1970:205)—but his was certainly an Islamic heresy (although, interestingly, Annemarie Schimmel (1975:67-8) suggests that political, rather than religious reasons were to the fore in his execution—and even Sathya Sai Baba’s accounts have him executed ‘for the offence of disobeying the King’, rather than for heresy *per se*).

²⁰ E.g. the “merging of the gods” motif and in the identification of Indra, Prajāpati etc. with Viṣṇu.

²¹ D 250 (9-1984)

²² See, e.g., http://groups.yahoo.com/group/saidevotees_worldnet/message/2060 [28-11-2006].

only other account he gives of the story of al-Hallāj, he does have him as a ‘Muslim ...declaring: ...Anul Huq! Anul Huq’²³ (albeit ‘three centuries ago in Northern India’ and with ‘pandits’ to condemn him) and he merely notes that: ‘This corresponds to the *vedantic* declarations, *Aham Brahmaasmi* (“I am “Brahman”), *Soham*²⁴ (I am He)’²⁵. Moreover, he even sometimes compares the teachings of Jesus unfavourably to those of Kṛṣṇa due to their lack of emphasis on the ‘*Atmic* principle’—claiming thereby that Jesus was not an avatar, but rather (perhaps echoing Islamic understandings) a “messenger of God”²⁶, and he shows rough familiarity with some of the major traditional Christian accounts of Jesus²⁷.

The first two of these cases are coordinating inclusivism—Buddha’s statements are homologized to the “spirit of the Veda”, and that of al-Hallāj is explicitly said to “correspond” to vedāntic aphorisms. But the example invoking Jesus hierarchically subordinates him to Kṛṣṇa—Jesus is rejected as an avatar (but included as a ‘messenger of God’) in the process of an “ascent” to the advaitic “ātmic principle”. And another example in which Sathya Sai Baba refers to Jesus indicates what we might see as a general preference for the latter of these two types of inclusivism:

You are God, this is the teaching of all the religions. Christ initially said that “I am the Messenger of God”. There is always a distance between Messenger and his Master. After some time, Christ said that, “I am the Son of God.” Here the relationship with God has increased. After a few more years, Christ said, “I and My Father are One.” Then comes the Holy Ghost. This is what Bharathiyas described as ‘*Dvaita*’ (Dualism), *Vishistaadvaita*’ (Qualified Non-dualism), ‘*Advaita*’ (Non-dualism) and the state of *Thureeya*.²⁸

This is transcending (and again ‘egalitarian’) inclusivism—“the teaching of all the religions” is portrayed as the being same (in advaitic terms—“You are God”), and the three statements of Jesus²⁹, along with the Christian doctrine of the “Holy

²³ NB The inaccurate (/inconsistent—cf. S29 9:85ff.) pseudo-phonetic spelling of this pronouncement, and the erroneous date and location for this story, indicate that this is not merely an editorial emendation intended to “cover up” Sathya Sai Baba’s ignorance (cf. p.14 above)—the editors show no awareness of more correct historical circumstances or transliteration of this proclamation.

²⁴ NB This is a dictum especially emphasized in tantric traditions—e.g., as Woodroffe (1971:378) translates, *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* 14:152 urges one to ‘constantly think upon and realize the saying, “Saḥ ahaṁ”’—which Woodroffe glosses as ‘So`ham = I am He—i.e., I am one with the Supreme’.

²⁵ (31-3-1996) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/d960331.html> [2-12-2006]

²⁶ (24-11-1998) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume31/sss31-44.pdf> [29-3-2007] Cf. p.235.

²⁷ See, e.g., a collection of Sathya Sai Baba’s sayings on Jesus by Sai devotee J.Jagadeesan (1989).

²⁸ (4-9-1998) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume31/sss31-28.pdf> [12-7-2007]

²⁹ NB Only the latter two of these statements are to be found in the Bible (see: Bassuk (1987b:176), and, for example, *John* 10:30-38), the first perhaps being inspired, rather, by Islamic understandings of Jesus. Interestingly, in the biblical passage just cited, Jesus cites his performance of miracles and

Ghost”, are implied to be products of an “ascent” through lower levels of understanding, indeed being explicitly homologized (a touch of “coordinating inclusivism”) to the major traditional schools of Indian philosophy that we saw Sathya Sai Baba construe in this manner earlier (p.255). And this “ascent” culminates in the fashion prescribed by Halbfass (p.249) and Potter (p.256), as the transcendent “truth” of *advaita* is ultimately portrayed as superseding all other religious understandings—including Hindu ones—and even itself³⁰.

Before we progress to the next section, I should note that the episteme of resemblance is central to all of the types of inclusivism that we have seen in this section. Coordinating inclusivism (without subordination) corresponds fairly closely to “horizontal connection via resemblance” in Smith’s terms—Jayanta homologizes all scriptures to the Vedas and classes all great religious leaders as avatars. Coordinating subordinating inclusivism corresponds to “hierarchical connection through resemblance”—Hinduism is placed on top of other religions but is nonetheless connected to them as aspects of itself, as rivers flowing into its ocean. Transcendent inclusivism (without subordination) is a variant of the post-vedic emphases on identity that Smith noted—Buddha, Jesus etc. are identified as *advaitins*, various religions are identified as being one or pointing to one goal. And transcendent subordinating inclusivism is something of a progressive rejection of the ultimate validity of other religious traditions—based upon the degree to which they resemble Advaita, and even, ultimately, a rejection of Advaita in favour of *advaita*—the non-dual *ātmā*. This is perhaps partly analogous to interiorization. What separates “inclusivism” from the earlier forms that I have recalled here is a preliminary sense of “otherness” in regard to the traditions that are included—this “alienness” we may recall, is explicitly specified by Hacker in his definition of inclusivism, and this sense seems to grow stronger as we progress chronologically.

As to the significance of such a sense of “alienness”, I would note that the famous biblical proclamation of Jesus that “no prophet is accepted in his hometown” (*Luke* 4:24) has an obverse in an observation of Ramakrishna (1965:217) (upon which Sathya Sai Baba sometimes draws³¹):

quotes Jewish scripture as evidence in support of these claims: “I said, Ye are gods”. Whilst this does not seem to be required of the traditional Hindu avatars (theophanic transfiguration—the like of which we encountered in the previous chapter—is the usually favoured means by which the traditional Hindu avatars provide evidence of their divinity), Sathya Sai Baba certainly does this.

³⁰ NB On *turiya* (to which Sathya Sai Baba refers above) the “fourth” state of consciousness (i.e. a state transcending the three states of “waking”, “dreaming” and “deep-sleep”), see p.168,n.27.

³¹See, e.g.: Sathya Sai Baba (21-8-1986) S19 17:138; (20-11-1979) S14 39:242

There is always a shadow under the lamp, while its light illumines the surrounding objects. So men in the immediate proximity of a prophet do not understand him. Those who live far off are charmed by his spiritual glow and his extraordinary power.

The far off figures of Buddha, Jesus etc. have a mystique and charisma due to their being “far off”³², and are also widely recognized as “traditional authorities” on spiritual matters—even if the details of their teachings are little known. Thus, in inclusivism (coordinating or transcending) without subordination, I would suggest that authority is being derived from these figures in support of traditional Hindu views. Subordinating inclusivism, on the other hand, draws more upon rational than traditional or charismatic authority—the focus is more upon the supremacy of the Hindu message than upon the authority of the traditions that are subordinated—and this authority is imposed upon these “alien” figures, rather than being drawn from them. The case in which Sathya Sai Baba rejects Jesus as an avatar is but the most striking example of this.

In terms of the manner in which authority is invoked, there is thus a significant difference between at least some of the types of inclusivism that I have outlined. And, as just noted, most of these types accord with some independently posited traditional Indian ways of thinking. Perhaps “inclusivism” (as a whole) is definitively (if not distinctively) “Indian” after all? Smith (1989:221) and others³³, however, have noted that these traditional forms of thought have an affinity even with modern academic practices. Indeed, what I have just done here itself exemplifies this. I have coordinated, yet subordinated, the terms of Halbfass, Forsthoefel and Humes to my own, in turn coordinating these with those of Smith, and finally subordinating all of these to Weber’s categories—to which I earlier ascribed the transcendent status of “universals”.

I would further suggest that some of the other key traditional processes that I have outlined are similar cases—most obviously “distinction” and “categorization”—I have distinguished and categorized four modes of inclusivism. “Enumeration” is definitely an exception³⁴—but perhaps in part only because of the fact that I am producing a written, rather than an oral work—I commented earlier upon the

³² Cf. Heesterman (1985:15-16): ‘modernity—already in a sense “transcendent” by the fact of its alienness—falls in line with the transcendent legitimation that brahminic theory possesses’.

³³ See, e.g., Doniger (1980), pp.11-12.

³⁴ I.e., I attribute no significance to there being four types of inclusivism, whereas, as we have seen, traditional works often enumerate entities so as to fall in line with “magic” numbers (3, 4, 5, 9, 16, 18 etc.). It is purely coincidental that my thesis has 9 chapters (of 4 sections each), and 675 pages!

mnemonic function that this traditional propensity must have served. And the other exceptions here: “ethicization” and “spiritualization” are only so because of my deliberate attempt at detachment and scholarly neutrality (as outlined in Section 1.1), but even they inevitably persist in subtle forms. We might even see “interiorization” as (at least a theoretical) possibility—if I were to attempt, for instance, to coordinate any of the above to recent insights from the field of cognitive science on the basic (not culture-specific) workings of the human mind. This is something that I have not had time to consider in any depth, but, at the very least, I might note that human beings seem to be fundamentally predisposed to see (something akin to) “connections through resemblance”—similar stimuli produce similar responses in the brain, which naturally prompt us to associate such stimuli.

But the fact that we often make such associations even when no “real” (material or causal) connections exist highlights one major difference between modern scholarship and the traditional modes of thought under discussion here. Part of the task of modern scholars is to distinguish between superficial and fundamental resemblances in line with the (supposedly) objective ideal of “knowledge”, whereas traditionally (and for Sathya Sai Baba), the basis of resemblance is rarely called into question—the focus is very much upon using resemblances to serve theological or political ends. And, in any case, it is also clear from what we have seen that, even if the basic form of thinking involved in “inclusivism” is a “fundamental tendency of human thought”, some of its specific expressions seem to require (or at least are greatly facilitated by) *advaita* traditions. In this sense, the question as to whether or not “inclusivism” is distinctively “Indian” is irrelevant. We have seen that it is an important consequence of *advaita* thinking, and we will encounter echoes of this throughout the remainder of this study, especially in “Neo-Hinduism”—which, as we will see, was much influenced by *advaita*.

To conclude this section, it is perhaps apt for us to briefly consider what historical influence (if any) the likes of the “alien” figures who we encountered above may have had on the development of the avatar doctrines as a whole. Earlier (p.127,n.3;p.191), I briefly noted something of potential Buddhist (and Jain) influences on this, and we saw above that Jayanta considered these figures to be avatars, but, other than this, there does not seem to be much to say. We will see that the Buddha was simply adopted into the avatar schema via transcendent inclusivism—little of the sense of his Buddhist identity persists. As to the case of the Sūfīs, Parrinder (1970:198,92-94) suggests that ‘Sūfī mystical teachings on unity

have an important bearing on [Christian] belief in Incarnation' (which we will see to have an influence upon (especially modern) Hindu ideas of the avatar), but he notes that the coming of Islam to India lent itself rather to 'categorical denial that God has any associates, or can be represented by any images [with consequent] ...periods of fierce persecution of Hindus'. He cites Kabīr, in particular, as one of the first to seek 'some kind of religious synthesis, in traditional Indian fashion'—but, even in this, Islamic exclusivism left its mark, for 'Kabīr went on to deny explicitly the Avatars and personal representations of divinity'³⁵. Nevertheless, Parinder also notes that Kabīr's 'followers gave almost divine honours to [him]... in a manner reminiscent of the Avatars themselves', and—whilst we must put down as another case of Vaiṣṇava "imperialism"³⁶ the fact that Kabīr later came to be explicitly seen as an avatar (see p.90 above)—this no doubt contributed to the persistence of the avatar idea in India at this time. I will focus upon such devotional ideals in the next section.

³⁵ NB It is true that Kabīr often invokes the name of Rāma, but, as Whaling (1980:4,114) notes, 'Rāma in this sense is not taken to be an incarnation'; rather, this is 'a new view of Rāma as transcendent and immanent yet formless.... It is this view of Rāma that ...lead to Rāma's becoming the general word for God in North India'.

³⁶ NB Sai Baba of Shirdi—who as we saw earlier much aligned himself with Kabīr—we might see as a similar case, for though he was much cast as an avatar after his death, his own background was far more strongly Sūfī than Hindu (see Marianne Warren 1997,1999).

4.5 Devotional Descents

The Avathar or Form Incarnate is only the concretisation of the yearning of the seekers. It is the solidified sweetness of the devotion of godly aspirants. The formless assumes the Form for the sake of these aspirants and seekers. They are the prime cause.¹

Sheridan (1986:66) notes that in the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* the avatar ‘comes to earth “in deference to the wishes of the devotees”’, and the above passage indicates that Sathya Sai Baba (in his retelling of this work at least) adheres to a similar understanding. As Dandekar (1979:30-31) notes, there are ‘faint traces of the doctrine of *bhakti* [devotion]... even in certain hymns of the *Ṛgveda*’—indeed, I earlier (p.165) noted such traces in hymns dedicated to Viṣṇu, and, in the same place, we saw early evidence of devotion towards upaniṣadic *gurus* and deities. Nevertheless, it is only by the time of the epic works that devotion is promoted as central to spiritual practice—Brian Smith (1989:214) writes that:

The Gītā introduces the new teaching of *bhakti* in the guise of the reinterpreted “true sacrifice”... [the] ritual of *pūjā* to the image of Viṣṇu, Śiva, the Goddess, or one of their avatars simultaneously replaces the *yajña* while it incorporates within itself many rites from the Vedic sacrifice. ...Already in the Mahābhārata, Kṛṣṇa is said “to be” the sacrifice.

This is another example of “transcendent inclusivism” from a context outside of that of (impersonalist) *advaita*, and in yet another example of this, in the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, as Parrinder (1970:77-78) describes it:

Krishna appears in crown of peacock feathers, yellow robe, and shining blue-black skin. He reproaches the *gopīs* for leaving their husbands. They reply that they come full of devotion to the Primal Spirit (*ādi-puruṣa*) ...the *gopīs* all pray, ‘you are not the son of the cowherd, you are the inner soul of all beings.... Passionate love (*prema*) is here the chief relationship of God and man.

Kṛṣṇa is identified with the *antaryāmin* and the *Puruṣa*. There is a *double-entendre* in this last regard, for ‘*puruṣa*’, in addition to the meanings we have thus far encountered, can also mean any (ordinary) male human being (with whom the *gopīs* might commit adultery), and Sathya Sai Baba too sometimes plays upon this distinction in this context². But, most importantly, the primarily cosmological function of this figure in ancient traditions is here superseded by devotional concerns.

As we saw in the previous section, there is a sense in which the avatar is understood as being a necessary tangible focus for the devotional practices of ordinary mortals—certainly, to give another example here, Sathya Sai Baba often expresses

¹ Sathya Sai Baba, BV 2

² See, e.g., Sathya Sai Baba (24-10-1966) S6 36:182

this type of view:

Bhakthi is really unswerving loyalty to God with form and attributes and a name. You can grasp with the reason that you are endowed with, only concrete name-attribute-full things. So, God has to appear before you with form and attributes (*sa-kaara* [sic], *saguna*, *swaruupa*) so that you can love Him and serve Him and follow Him and get liberated by Him [(14-10-1964) S4 34:201-202].

And, traditionally also (in addition to what we saw earlier), ideas of the avatar are strongly connected with devotional concerns. Parrinder (1970:126) outlines some influential passages in this regard that relate to Kṛṣṇa (Bhagavān, “God”):

God is implored to show mercy and grace, to enter into loving communion:

*As father to his son, as friend to friend,
As lover to beloved.*

...God is ‘an ocean of boundless compassion, moral excellence, tenderness, generosity, and sovereignty, the refuge of the whole world without distinction of persons’. By his Avatar God ‘can be seen by the eyes of all men’.

In this, he cites the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (11:44) and the commentary of Rāmānuja upon it, and, as Kumarappa (1933:111) notes, grace, love, devotion, and salvation are similarly portrayed in the Purāṇas as the primary concern of the avatars.

Sathya Sai Baba echoes these understandings too—the quotation at the head of this section provides an example of this, and he claims: ‘I must save every one of you; even if you say, nay, and move away, I shall do it... That is My basic Nature, Love and Mercy’³. Indeed, he asks rhetorically: ‘What other task have I than the showering of Grace?’⁴, and sees devotion as something of a panacea:

What then is the remedy? The answer is just one word---“Worship.” ...You can get the feeling for the Divine only if you have a taste of the *Prema* of the Divine. That is why the *Avatar* has come to give you a taste of that *Prema*, so that the yearning for the Lord will be planted in your heart [(24-11-1961) S2 26:139].

Sheridan (1986:100) notes that the Sanskrit term *prema* (love) traditionally expresses ‘ardent tenderness and fondness especially between two lovers’ and is much utilized in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*—in which, in parallel to the above: ‘The love of the Deity... leads the Deity to reveal Himself... to the devotee... to arouse in him “holy yearning” after the Deity’⁵. According to Sathya Sai Baba, “grace” may be earned from him as avatar by faithful obedience of his commands⁶, long-

³ Sathya Sai Baba (23-11-1961) S2 25:132

⁴ (10-10-1961) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspspeaks/volume02/ssso2-15.pdf> [12-7-2007]

⁵ B. Kumarappa (1933), p.114.

⁶ Sathya Sai Baba (10-1961) S2 22:116

suffering of *adharma* (injustice)⁷, and by a traditional (technical) triad of means: ‘*darshana*, *sparshana* and *sambhashana*’ (seeing, touching and conversing [with him])⁸. Describing the significance of this triad, Sathya Sai Baba invokes three traditional Sanskrit aphorisms:

“*Dharshanam paapa naashanam*” (Sight of the Lord destroys all sins). “*Sambhashanam Sankata naashanam*” (Conversing with the Lord destroys all grief). “*Sparshanam Karma vimochanam*” (The touch of the Divine liberates one from all karmic bonds).⁹

Babb (1986:183) notes the importance of these three means of imparting grace—saying that they are ‘standard Hindu patterns’ and that: ‘Practically everything that Sathya Sai Baba’s devotees say, do and think about him can be seen as exemplifying these patterns’, and whilst, as we will see shortly (p.273), recent events run contrary to this assertion, there is obviously much truth in it.

Babb gives no traditional reference for the three verses cited by Sathya Sai Baba here, and I also, have not come across a *locus classicus* for these aphorisms (if, indeed, there is one), but the terms occur in a Sanskrit work by the famous medieval Maharashtrian devotional saint Rāmdās (1608-1681): ‘*sadā darśanaṃ sparśanaṃ tasya puṇyaṃ | tathā bhāṣaṇaṃ nāśakaṃ saṁśayaśya*’¹⁰—“There is merit for one who is always seeing and touching; moreover, conversing is the destroyer of doubts”¹¹—and the general idea is evident in *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 11.7.44:

Water in a holy spot is by nature pure, smooth, and sweet and purifying by *sight*, *touch* and *chanting* of its name. Similarly, a sage should become a friend of men and make them pure (by absolving them from sins) [emphasis added].¹²

The concept of *darśan*¹³ is certainly an ancient one—and Gonda (1969:77-78) notes parallels in this with the role of the ancient Indian (divine) king, who:

was expected to show himself in full state to his subjects every morning. As it was supposed auspicious to glance at his divine person people flocked to his palace for this purpose. ...Praising the king is also a good and auspicious activity.¹⁴

And the touch of a king (or a holy person) is highly regarded in many cultures.

That devotion to the avatar should lead to the attainment of the traditional

⁷ Sathya Sai Baba (9-10-1964) S4 30:172

⁸ Sathya Sai Baba (10-10-1961) S2 15:71

⁹ (15-3-1992) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume25/sss25-09.pdf> [20-3-2007]

¹⁰ *Manobodha* 133 (Cf. http://sanskrit.gde.to/doc_raama/manobodha-skt.itx [24-2-2007])

¹¹ My translation—this is the sense that I get from the passage, but I have not checked its context.

¹² Tagare (1978), Part V, p.1943 NB The relevant Sanskrit phrase here is *ikṣopasparśa-kīrtanaiḥ*.

¹³ NB On *darśan* see, especially, Diana Eck (1996).

¹⁴ NB See David Smith (1985:70,80) on the “magical power of praise”.

spiritual goal of “liberation” is also in keeping with general traditional understandings—as Parrinder (1970:38) writes, in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*:

it is said that whoever knows Krishna’s divine birth and actions as they are truly, when he leaves the body at death he is not reborn but he goes to the Lord. Deliverance from the round of rebirth, the quest of Indian teachers since the doctrine of transmigration became articulate, is constantly said throughout the *Gītā* to be the sure result of devotion to Krishna.

The first sentence here is a paraphrase of *Bhagavad-Gītā* 4:9, and such sentiments are paralleled in the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* (e.g. 10:69.17; 10:86.48). Indeed, Matchett (2001:169) writes that: ‘The idea that the *avatāra* comes to make liberation available is strong in the *Bhāgavata*’, and I would add that in later Vaiṣṇava interpretations ‘the power to grant salvation (*mokṣadatva-svabhāva*)’ is even theologically formalized as a characteristic of the avatars¹⁵.

Sathya Sai Baba, as we have seen, sometimes explicitly portrays “salvation” or granting “liberation” as a purpose of his avatar, and, whilst he also claims that few will strive to achieve the ‘liberation’ that he offers¹⁶, this accords with *Bhagavad-Gītā* 7:3, in which Kṛṣṇa avers: ‘Of thousands of men, perhaps one strives for perfection; even of those who strive and are perfected, perhaps one knows me in essence’. Similarly, Sathya Sai Baba cites granting liberation to the worthy¹⁷ (after many meritorious lives¹⁸) and even to those who are unworthy¹⁹ as important functions of the avatar, echoing *Bhagavad-Gītā* 9:30-31—which has Kṛṣṇa state: ‘Even if a great evil doer worships me with exclusive devotion, he must be thought righteous alone, for he has right resolution. Swiftly he becomes a righteous soul; he goes to eternal peace’. Sathya Sai Baba also describes liberation as being granted by the avatar in other traditional (purāṇic) technical terms²⁰: ‘God acts like man and moves with him so as to give the four states of *Samipyā* [sic] (nearness), *Saaroopyā* (same form), *Saalokya* and *Saayujya* (oneness with Him)’²¹. But he elaborates little upon this—his purpose here would seem to be that familiar from out previous chapter—an appeal to traditional and rational-legal authority.

In addition to this, Sathya Sai Baba draws strongly upon more recent devotional

¹⁵ De (1961), p.250.

¹⁶ Sathya Sai Baba (4-2-1963) S3 3:25

¹⁷ Sathya Sai Baba (5-2-1963) S3 4:30

¹⁸ Sathya Sai Baba (24-12-1980) S14 60:386

¹⁹ SSV 98

²⁰ Sheridan (1986:93) notes that *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 9:4.67, for example, mentions these.

²¹ Sathya Sai Baba (23-6-1996) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/pv960623.html> [12-7-2007]

traditions, including the most popular of traditional South Indian (and Telugu) poet-saints, Tyāgarāja (1767-1847 CE), who, as Jackson (1994:135-136,209) writes: ‘sang most of his hundreds of exquisite lyrics to an avatar of Viṣṇu—Rāma’. Jackson notes that ‘hundreds of Tyāgarāja songs were soon favorites of the music-loving public all over South India, including Andhra Pradesh’, and Sathya Sai Baba is evidently very familiar with some of these songs—Haraldsson (1997:150) cites one of his early devotees as recalling:

Swami used to sing many songs of Indian classical music as [if he were] an experienced, trained singer. ...Sometimes he would sing some rare compositions of Thyagaraja that only learned musicians would know. ...my music teacher asked him: ‘Where did you learn these songs?’ Baba then answered: ‘Thyagaraja had these songs from me, Thyagaraja was inspired by Rama’, meaning that Swami was the origin of Thyagaraja’s music.

He thus invokes his avatar identity to override any suggestion that he might have learned such songs by conventional means, or be employing them for his own devotional purposes, and indeed this is his usual viewpoint in regard to devotion—it is not something that he practises, but rather something others display (or should display) towards him (see pp.274,272 below).

Another prominent Telugu poet, Vemana (17th century CE), is also noteworthy as a potential influence on the ideas of Sathya Sai Baba. As C.P.Brown (1829:196) translates, Vemana sings, for example:

They cannot understand that there is but one God in
the Siva, the Vishnu and all other creeds! Though
these differ, can any diversity exist in truth (tatwa)?

Again, Sathya Sai Baba sometimes specifically refers to Vemana and occasionally recites his verses. As Sathya Sai Baba puts it, Vemana ‘composed a number of couplets and quatrains which succinctly summarise a whole system of philosophy and a complete code of morality’²². But it is Vemana’s strong *advaita* ideals that most interest us here. As Brown (1829:60) translates it, Vemana sings:

If thou be thyself converted into those three
Brahma, Vishnu and Siva, who created, saved and
destroy the three worlds and praise them, this man
shall be transformed into the deity.

...He who hath reduced Brahma, Vishnu and Siva
in one shall become a parama yogee [supreme yogī]
and the divinity. How can we comprehend one who

²² <http://www.sssbpt.info/summershowers/ss1979/ss1979-10.pdf> [26-11-2006].

thus is equal to the divinity.

Chandaka Sri Krishna (2004:245) notes a suggestion that Vemana was a Nāth *yogī*, and this verse would fit well with what I noted earlier of Nāth philosophy and goals. Like the Nāths, Vemana also presents himself as something of an avatar—especially of Śiva—as Brown (1829:145) translates:

Vemana is like to a man without food, void of anger, in every place at every (word i.e.,) moment, also in the form of verse has he spoken decidedly and so that it might be understood by all, in the earth he assumed the form of Siva, who is there who, time after time, is equal to Vemana?

Brown's translations leave a bit to be desired, but the general sense is clear.

A similar case is that of prominent Telugu poet-saint, Potulūri Vīra Brahmam (18th century CE). Velcheru Narayana Rao (1996:201) writes that:

Potulūri Vīra Brahmam, believed to be an incarnation of Viṣṇu, foretold the future and promised rebirth of the golden age [cf. p.205 above]. Probably belonging to the late eighteenth century, this guru, worshiped by artisan castes in Andhra Pradesh, composed a number of songs (*kīrtanas*) sung by mendicants.

And R.N.Pillai (1991:112) adds that: 'he sometimes looked like a Saivite; at other times he was so perfectly Vaishnavite that those around called him an incarnation of Vishnu'; and the 'advaita of the Upanishads was his basic theme and the central thrust of his philosophical crusade'. Pillai (1991:24,25) further notes that Vīra Brahmam was famed for his 'powers of religious magic' which [like those attributed to Sathya Sai Baba] included magical production of food ('a variety of sweetmeats'), the use of *vibhūti* for healing (to cure blindness, for example), and even stretched to resurrecting the dead. Moreover, Pillai (1991:48,71) portrays him as an eschatological figure, promising to reincarnate as 'veerabhogavasantaraya' and as citing *Bhagavad-Gītā* 4:7 in alluding to the avatar role that he would thus take upon himself.

This role was soon fulfilled, or so it is claimed—Sri Krishna (2004:235) writes:

Vīrabrahmaṁ wrote that he shall be reborn after two hundred years as Viśvanātha Avadhūta. It is popularly believed that Vīrabrahmaṁ is an incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu and Viśvanātha Avadhūta is a reincarnation of Lord Śiva.

As Sri Krishna describes it, however, Viśvanātha Avadhūta (1850-1916) does not himself seem to have made much of this identification. And, whilst Pillai (1991:xi) cites Vīra Brahmam as (like Sathya Sai Baba) predicting future greatness for him-

self ('The world will one day honour me'), Stephen Fuchs (1965:260-261) writes:

He must have been one of the many reformers who from time to time rise up in India, influence thousands over several generations, are already deified and worshipped during their lifetime, and even to a greater degree after their death, and are then forgotten.

Nonetheless, and although Sathya Sai Baba himself does not refer to him, Vira Brahmam can perhaps be seen as a part of the general religious milieu in which Sathya Sai Baba today is able to prosper. Certainly, Anil Kumar—Sathya Sai Baba's current English translator—cites 'Veerabrahmendra Swamy' as 'a great sage, who foretold thousands and thousands of years ago about what is happening today'²³. And long-time Sai devotee Pedda Bottu (2005:63) even explicitly cites one of his prophecies as being descriptive of Sathya Sai Baba.

In any case, there is certainly some evidence that devotional practices played a significant role in the formative stages of Sathya Sai Baba's religious career. Padmanaban (2000:65,67) writes that when Sathya Sai Baba attended 'Elementary School in Bukkapatnam... four kilometres away from Puttaparthi...':

Outside the town was the temple of Goddess Chowdamma²⁴. Sathya would go there in the afternoon, to have his lunch in solitude.... After lunch, Sathya would be lost in thought, in the quiet sanctuary of the temple, gazing at a small picture of Sai Baba of Shirdi, which he always carried with him.

Similarly, Padmanaban (2000:78) reports the testimony of one of Sathya's classmates as follows:

Even in school days he used to bring flowers and perform puja [ritualistic worship] to Shirdi Sai. He had pasted Shirdi Baba pictures in all his books and also carried one in his pocket.

Or, again, Padmanaban (2000:166) writes:

For a while Baba stayed alone in the only room of His father's house. He had a picture of Shirdi Sai Baba and would always pray and recite *Dhandakam* (repeated chanting of God's name). He would also sing bhajans all by Himself.

Clearly, the young Sathya styled himself a devotee of Shirdi Sai Baba, and his devotions culminated, it would seem, in an incident that Padmanaban (2000:160, n70) cites one of Sathya Sai Baba's former classmates as telling:

Raju apparently fell down from the bench upon which he had been standing in his class. He woke up after five minutes and asked... why so many Shirdi Baba pictures were hanging in the classroom... and was told "Swami, we are ordinary people, we

²³ http://www.saibaba.ws/sai_pw/spowo11.htm [12-7-2007]

²⁴ NB On village goddesses, see p.271,n.27 below.

cannot see the photos.”

Whether we categorize this as a schizophrenic episode or a spiritual experience (I will say more of such experiences shortly), it is clear that the image of Shirdi Sai Baba had thoroughly permeated the young Sathya's consciousness.

And it is not the case that Sai Baba of Shirdi was the only focus of his devotion. Padmanaban (2000:35,87) writes that, when Sathya Sai Baba was even younger:

Venkataiah, an itinerant cloth vendor ...taught Pandari Bhajans to the people of Puttaparthi... a group of children, including Sathya... learnt Pandari Bhajans from Venkataiah and they, in turn, trained other children.

...Pandaripur [sic], in the state of Maharashtra, is the abode [shrine] of Lord Vittala [Kṛṣṇa] and his consort, Rukmini. The worship of Vithoba, another name for Lord Vittala, encourages people from different religions, castes, creeds and gender to join together in singing his praise.²⁵

Or, again, Padmanaban writes that when 'Raju' (the young Sathya) later:

moved to Uravakonda [Fig.23] some 140km to the NW of Puttaparthi, under the care of his brother ...the ancient Subramanya [sic] Temple²⁶... was practically the full-time retreat for young Raju and his group of little followers.

Moreover, Padmanaban (2000:89,98) notes in this location:

a small shrine of the village deity Sunkulamma. Very often, people used to see young Raju at this shrine ...and that of another deity, Muthialamma, not far off....²⁷ Then there was the *Budagavi* [a.k.a. 'Buddagavi', 'since Buddhist monks lived there'²⁸]... His sister says that when he arrived home late one night 'He said he had gone to 'Budagavi' to perform *abhishekam* [ritual bathing] to Lord Shiva....

Thus, early in his life at least (prior to proclaiming his identity as Sai Baba), Sathya engaged in a variety of devotional practices—and, evidently for reasons other than

²⁵ On Viṭhobā see G.A.Deleury (1960); on Paṇḍharpur, see C. Vaudeville (1996), pp.199-220. NB As we will see, this emphasis on overcoming traditional sociological distinctions is typical of *bhakti* cults, of Neo-Hinduism—e.g. Vivekananda (Hiltrud Rüstau, 1998, 270), of some South Indian religious traditions (p.286 below), and of Sathya Sai Baba's own teachings—one of his most oft quoted aphorisms includes the statements: 'There is only one religion, the Religion of Love; there is only one caste, the Caste of Humanity' [(24-12-1972) S11 54:347].

²⁶ Subrahmanya is a name for the (second) son of Śiva especially favoured by South Indian mythological traditions. NB On general parallels between the contemporary personae of Sathya Sai Baba and Subrahmanya (Skanda) see Arvind Sharma (1983).

²⁷ NB As Konduri Sarojini Devi (1990:257)—writing of medieval South India—notes: 'Worship and propitiation of Grāmadēvatas or village deities was an important feature of popular religion. People believed that the village goddesses were the guardian deities of the land who protected them from famine and pestilence, evil spirits and evil effects. Even today the cult of these goddesses is very popular in Southern India and no village is found without the shrine of the Grāmadēvata'.

²⁸ Padmanaban (2000), p.91,n5. NB Andhra Pradesh was once a stronghold of Buddhism (see, for example, Sharma (1987), p.100), and (evidently) is home to a few surviving outposts of this religion (which is otherwise uncommonly found in India).

simply teaching his followers, for he is described as being alone in his devotions.

And this devotional focus did continue strongly into the early years of his career after his assuming the name Sathya Sai Baba, for Jackson (1994:3) quotes him as saying: ‘I wrote 2,000 bhajans by the time I was sixteen’. This may be something of a rhetorical exaggeration on Sathya Sai Baba’s part, but Padmanaban notes evidence that he did indeed compose an extraordinary number of devotional songs. But, as his above-cited claim to be “the Highest” testifies, he soon adopted the idea that personal displays of devotion were anathema to his avatar persona. That claim, in which he states that he will undertake “no spiritual practice” (i.e. *sādhana*), was made in 1955, and in 1968, he justifies any appearances to the contrary by way of an analogy—an appeal to rational authority:

An Officer of the Indian Civil Service has to write on the slate, A, B, C, and D and pronounce those letters, in order to teach his children the alphabet. When you find him doing so, you do not infer that he is himself learning the alphabet, do you? Therefore, do not be surprised if I sing *bhajan* songs; I am but initiating you into this most efficacious *saadhana* [(29-3-1968) S8 16:73].

As we saw earlier (p.234), he elsewhere proclaims that his devotees can themselves ‘become Sai Baba’, through understanding ‘the principle of unity’ (i.e., that which we saw him present at the head of this section as being the goal of *bhajans*), and in this, I would thus suggest that he is drawing upon his own experience of devotion to this figure. Once such a transcendent identity is realized, *bhajans* obviously have no place, but up until that stage is reached, they are “efficacious”; this, as we saw earlier (p.201), Sathya Sai Baba elsewhere makes explicit, again in so doing, paralleling the understandings of Śaṅkara.

Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings on devotion, then, are in accordance with traditional ideas and forms—in addition to having (presumably) been influenced by his own early devotional experiences. But, despite all of the above, we must note that Sathya Sai Baba sometimes discourages his devotees from pursuing traditional forms of devotion. Indeed, as early as 1965, Sathya Sai Baba installed a policy by which he refused to accept (material) devotional offerings from his followers:

You must have wondered why I have prohibited you from bringing flowers and fruits and other offerings; you argue that the *Geetha* requires that you must bring at least these when you come to the Lord; that when going to the presence of elders and saints, one should not go empty handed. Here, in this Prashanthi Nilayam, *pathram*, *pushpam*, *phalam* and *thoyam* (leaf, flower, fruit and water)---all the four should not be brought by devotees. Of course, I accept your offerings, but I take another four: *Sathya*, *Dharma*, *Shaanthi* and *Prema* (Truth, Virtue, Peace and Love)...

Give something divine if you want the Divine. *Prema*, *Shaanthi*, *Dharma* and *Sathya* are Divine. Do not try to get it for a flower that fades, a fruit that rots, a leaf that dries, water that evaporates [(30-9-1965) S5 42:234].

The verse rejected here is *Bhagavad-Gītā* 9:26, in which Kṛṣṇa says: ‘Be it a leaf or flower or fruit or water that a zealous soul may offer Me with love’s devotion, that do I [willingly] accept, for it was love that made the offering’²⁹. This is an ethicization of tradition on Sathya Sai Baba’s part, and an appeal to rational authority—the unexpressed premises of his argument being that the divine is by definition eternal, and these four values (being divine) are also such. Furthermore, this typifies Weber’s “charismatic” pattern: “It is written..., but I say unto you...”. Sathya Sai Baba overthrows traditional authority with help from the other two types, using this to push his ethical and spiritual agenda.

Since the *Bhagavad-Gītā* verse in question here is foundational to much traditional (Vaiṣṇava) devotional practice, Sathya Sai Baba’s rejection of it must be taken as directly contradicting what I noted earlier to be a potentially problematic conclusion of Swallow (1982:157)—that:

What he offers his devotees is the traditional *bhakti* resolution to their problems.... But the ways in which this devotion is demanded ...help to persuade them that their orthodoxy is right and proper, and that their traditional values are as relevant today as ever before.

And some additional examples further contradict this. Whilst *Bhagavad-Gītā* 9:13 extols those who praise Kṛṣṇa as “great-souls” (*mahātmānas*) and of “god-like nature” (*daivīm prakṛtim*), Sathya Sai Baba usually takes the opposite tack of discouraging praise (even claiming that it gives him a headache³⁰), saying ‘I do not like this praise, for praise places you at some distance, whereas I take delight in being with you, beside you, around you’³¹. He also goes to the extent of forbidding the deeply-ingrained traditional practice of *pāḍnamaskār*—bowing to touch the feet of one’s superiors (a type of *sparsanam*), for the reason that ‘I and you are one’³². We must also, therefore, add a qualification to an assertion by Babb (1986:160) that Sathya Sai Baba ‘does the things a deity should: he receives the homage and devotion of his devotees, and he reciprocates with love and boons’—evidently, at times, his ethical or spiritual concerns override this.

Significantly, both of Sathya Sai Baba’s disavowals of devotion that I have just

²⁹ Zaehner (1969), p.283

³⁰ Sathya Sai Baba (03-10-2000) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/doo1003.html> [3-10-2007]

³¹ See also Sathya Sai Baba (20-10-1963) S3 28:161

³² (5-7-2001) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/do10705.html> [12-7-2007]

cited draw upon advaitic reasoning. The first must be read alongside one of his most oft-referenced characterizations of the divine as the spiritual absolute—he says, for example, that ‘the universal I, the divine consciousness ...is all-pervading. It is within you, around you, below you, above you, and beside you. Truly, it is you’, and goes on to urge his devotees: ‘You must realize that you are not this, you are not that’³³, i.e. to reach the advaitic conclusion of “*neti neti*”. He presents his prohibition of *pāḍnamaskār* too as being for reasons of non-duality (“I and you are one”)³⁴, and indeed it (at least partially) resonates with some traditional *advaita* understands—Hacker (1978:210) writes:

In every philosophical work there is a place where convention requires the invocation of a deity, namely the *maṅgalâcaraṇa* or *namaskāra* at the beginning and the end or at the end only. Śaṅkara, however, deviates from this custom in most of his works. ...he says: ...“For he who, having been led to be Brahman, is consecrated to sovereignty, does not wish to bow to anybody.”

Moreover, Sathya Sai Baba elsewhere applies this type of understanding to himself (rather than just to his devotees)—claiming that he has no need for prayer, meditation, yoga or any other form of spiritual practice, since he is ‘the Highest’³⁵. There is some contrast here, however—for, as noted earlier, Sathya Sai Baba does not view himself as “having been led to be Brahman”, but as “the avatar”, whose basic nature is *brahman*. Accordingly, we saw that his “biographies” generally portray him as not undergoing any “process of spiritual development”, excepting for a few hints in some of the more recent of such works (see, e.g., pp.35,160).

But there is a sense in which all of this is typical of *bhakti* traditions in general—Ramanujan (1989:213) notes ‘the systematic (not random) subversion and reversals that Bhakti offers to its surrounding systems’, and, as we saw in the previous section, *bhakti* traditions often adopted advaitic terminology and understandings. So, perhaps, after all, Sathya Sai Baba does offer his followers something akin to what we saw Swallow characterize as the “traditional *bhakti* resolution to their problems”. His followers, however, are unlikely to view it in that manner (we saw him inverting some of the cornerstones of traditional devotional paradigms), and his is not the typical *bhakti* goal that we encountered in the previous section of “devotion that transcends liberation”³⁶—we saw that he views de-

³³ D 3

³⁴ He also claims that it is “to prevent jealousy”—in private settings, he continued to allow this practice. NB He has recently reverted to allowing it in public also.

³⁵ Sathya Sai Baba (Mahaashivaraathri,1955) S1 2:16. See also SSSA 157 (1962).

³⁶ Cf. (27-8-1986) S19 18:143-144, where he does invoke this, but has it lead to an ‘experience of

votion as superfluous once liberation (or “realization”) is achieved. This very much aligns him with more philosophical advaitic understandings.

I would also note that, in the last passage quoted above, Sathya Sai Baba presents himself as teaching *bhajans* by example—not merely by precept—and that, for this, he has no precedent in the cases of the traditional avatars. Rāma and Kṛṣṇa may in various works promote devotional practices, but they do not themselves (so far as I am aware) lead their followers in congregational singing. For this, we need to look to later avatar figures—the most significant of these being Caitanya (1486-1533). The case of Caitanya especially highlights some “ecstatic” dimensions of devotional experiences, the like of which again find some interesting parallels in Sathya Sai Baba’s early religious career.

Sheridan (1986:100-101) notes that the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* presents various “ecstatic” states as symptomatic of intense religious devotion; as Dumont (1970:57) writes, in this and contemporaneous devotional traditions, *bhakti* is described as:

a surging emotion which chokes the speech, makes the tears flow and the hair thrill with pleasurable excitement, and often leads to hysterical laughing and weeping by turns, to sudden fainting fits and to long trances of unconsciousness.

Caitanya very much embodied this emotion, and Sathya Sai Baba too, especially in his younger days, evinces such influences—devotees tell of his leading *bhajans* in the early days of his career (soon after the founding of his ashram) in which he would identify with Rādhā, the foremost of the *gopīs*, in her separation from Kṛṣṇa and sing “with tears streaming down his cheeks”, or relate that:

During the bhajans, he would stand in deep concentration, glowing in splendour and keep swaying his body forward and backward, for three to four hours. ...After arathi [the benediction], he would usually fall down.... He would get up after fifteen minutes or so, tired with his eyes red [LIMF 135].

I noted earlier an important case in which Sathya Sai Baba ‘collapsed and fell unconscious and remained so for several hours’ (p.107), but this last seems to be quite a separate (if similar) phenomenon, for there is no explicit devotional component. This is highlighted as Padmanaban (2000:141) cites a further description of such “falls” and “trances” from one of Sathya Sai Baba’s early devotees: ‘When He would come out of such a trance, He might report that He had been [on a transcorporeal journey] to save a devotee’. Quite why Sathya Sai Baba might need to go into a trance to help devotees at a distance is never explained—one might think that, as the all-powerful avatar, he could accomplish this by other means.

the unity underlying all creation’ rather than the *bhakti* goal of eternal life in heaven.

But this is in keeping with yogic elements of (especially) Kṛṣṇa as portrayed in the epics—Kṛṣṇa, as well as being the avatar, is often portrayed as an ideal *yogī*—and this aspect of his persona is intensified in some later epic accounts. Indeed, Chandaka Sri Krishna (2004:171) notes that a 13th century Telugu adaptation of the *Mahābhārata* has Kṛṣṇa go into a trance to commune with (his devotee) Bhīṣma.

Whilst Palmer (2005:121,n13), notes a suggestion that some (presumably ex-devotee or non-devotee) informants ‘interpret the seizures as epileptic rather than divine’, and whilst the earliest instances of such seizures were viewed even by Sathya Sai Baba’s family as evidence of spirit-possession (they employed exorcists in an attempt to ameliorate his condition)³⁷, Haraldsson (1997:177) cites the testimony of another ex-devotee of Sathya Sai Baba (a convert to Christianity) who had been with him in the early days that:

Swami often fell into trances, but he never shared the symptom of being possessed, such as speaking as if he were some personality different from his normal self. He was the same person all the time. Nor did his trances appear epileptic.

There is thus some contrast here with the potentially parallel case of Caitanya—of whom Bassuk (1987b:57) writes: ‘Fits often came on him in which he would stiffen and fall... he would lie for a long time on the ground in a frothing fit’. And in further contrast to the case of Sathya Sai Baba, as Parrinder (1970:83) describes it, Caitanya’s fits and trances were very much occasioned by devotion—indeed, Caitanya studied the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* in his formative years and very much exemplified its ideals in his life and teachings³⁸.

Nor does Sathya Sai Baba’s behavior resonate with typical descriptions of “holy madness” (in Indian contexts) as noted by Anne Feldhaus (1984:21). She writes of Guṇḍam Rāṭṭi (who we encountered earlier), that ‘his madness is for his followers a sign of divinity’, tying this in with Śaiva traditions in which ‘Śiva is often said to be a madman’. But Sathya Sai Baba makes no significant reference to such traditions, and, as Babb (1987:181-182) shows, his followers invariably see some sort of rationality in even his most haphazard behaviour. Nevertheless, there certainly are some interesting parallels that can be drawn between Sathya Sai Baba and some aspects of the lives of various exponents of ecstatic religion, Caitanya and

³⁷ NB As Susan Bayly (1989:27) writes of traditional village religion: ‘The key figures for almost all south Indians were (and still are) a group of beings who may be described as divinities of blood and power...most of the power divinities had the capacity to possess living men and women... Very often... possession is uninvited, a source of torment and debilitation which can only be relieved if the sufferer undergoes elaborate rites of exorcism’.

³⁸ See, e.g., Kinsley (1979), pp.179ff.

Guṇḍam Rāṭi included.

June McDaniel (1989:259), in a study of a number of such figures (approximately half of whom, she notes, were considered to be avatars), writes:

Most ecstasies were childhood visionaries, seeing nurturing deities, ghosts of dead friends and relatives, and magical animals.... From childhood on, many of the ecstasies occasionally fell into deathlike trances.... These early visions and trances caused relatives and neighbors to wonder about the sanity of these budding saints. All of them... were considered possessed or mentally ill at some time in their lives, usually for months or years at a time. This diagnosis was generally made during childhood or early adolescence. Many of them were treated for madness, either by exorcism or with Ayurvedic remedies. These remedies generally did not work.

And Sathya Sai Baba falls comfortably within this characterization—in addition to what we have already seen, it is interesting to note that Kasturi records childhood incidents (described by Sathya Sai Baba’s family) of his claiming to see *devatās* (gods) flying overhead outside, or ‘conversing with invisible Beings’³⁹.

Additionally, McDaniel (1989:261) observes that: ‘Almost all of the ecstasies had periods of wandering or seclusion’, and I have already noted an example of a lengthy period of seclusion in Sathya Sai Baba’s life (p.160 above). And there is evidence of him spending much time wandering too—early devotees relate that:

He would walk the hills alone and sit in silence on the rocks, for hours at a time... would leave the house at night and wander about aimlessly.... While singing bhajans, he would leave abruptly and walk away anywhere he liked.... Raju would sit on a deerskin before a Shirdi Baba portrait and spend the time alone, without talking, eating or doing anything [LIMF 115-117].

On another note, McDaniel (1989:270) writes that ecstasies often ‘take on disease or sin from disciples’⁴⁰, and this is a major theme of stories that he tells about himself to “explain” any “apparent” illnesses or accidents that befall him⁴¹.

McDaniel (1989:244) further writes that:

Many disciples interviewed stated that they were called to recognize the guru in dreams—that the guru appeared, showed his love and/or power, and asked the disciple to follow. The ecstatic may demonstrate immunity to pain... and poison ...He gives miraculous healings, especially by touch or materialized amulet... or materializes food for the hungry.

And all of this could equally be said of Sathya Sai Baba—who himself claims to

³⁹ ECM 41

⁴⁰ NB McDaniel (1989:247) suggests that this may ‘demonstrate Christian influence’, but the idea of holy men taking on the “sins” (i.e. *pāpa* or *karma*) of their followers (by touch, or through alms for example) is surely common in traditional Hinduism also.

⁴¹ See, e.g., (18-5-2000) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/doo0518.html> [12-7-2007]

appear in the dreams of devotees⁴²; claims to be immune to pain and poison (citing various instances in his life as evidence of this); and is famous for his miraculous healings, materialized food and amulets⁴³. Nevertheless, it is significant that Sathya Sai Baba does present at least some of these as being distinctive to himself—as evidence of his divine identity. Thus, for example, in describing his supposed immunity to pain, he states that this ‘cannot be felt by anyone except the Divine’⁴⁴. We saw earlier that such claims can generate “oppositional charisma” (p.233 above), and I will have a little more to say about this shortly.

Over and above what I have already noted, McDaniel (1989:246) cites the involvement of a number of ecstasies in ‘group miracles, especially the averting of epidemics and natural disasters’—giving examples of ‘attempts to stop a plague with Harināma [(reciting) the name of Kṛṣṇa]’, and ‘control over storms’. And, yet again, Sathya Sai Baba similarly claims to have averted ‘Cholera and Plague’ epidemics in his childhood by encouraging the singing of *bhajans*⁴⁵, and there are many accounts of his (apparently) averting unwelcome stormy weather⁴⁶. Even more significantly, McDaniel (1989:253) writes that: ‘The *siddha* [“perfected” ecstatic]⁴⁷ is often an androgynous figure, uniting male and female identities... At times this can extend to the physical world, as, for example hermaphrodites’—there are testimonies to Sathya Sai Baba’s physical and metaphorical androgyny⁴⁸.

We saw something of a traditional background for the metaphorical aspects of this androgyny in tales of Śiva and his consort, and, beyond this, as Bassuk (1987b:100) writes, this type of understanding applies to various modern figures who have claimed avatar status:

Ramakrishna was both Krishna, the god, and Kali, the goddess. Aurobindo and The

⁴² See, e.g.: Sathya Sai Baba (24-11-1998) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume31/sss31-44.pdf> [29-3-2007]; Elvie Bailey (1989). NB This is also true of Shirdi Sai Baba (see *Shri Sai Satcharita* and p.86 above); Parrinder (1970:89,n1) notes it to be a characteristic traditionally attributed to Śiva; and (Laine 1989:141) reports a dream in which Arjuna ‘has a vision of both Kṛṣṇa and Śiva’.

⁴³ See, e.g., (respectively): (25-12-1970) S10 39:263; (31-8-2002) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/do20831.html> [29-12-2006]; (19-6-1974) S12 38:228

⁴⁴ Sathya Sai Baba (26-8-1988) S21 23:187 NB See also p.391 below.

⁴⁵ (17-10-1999) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume32/sss32p2-10.pdf> [29-3-2007]

⁴⁶ See: ECM 34; http://groups.yahoo.com/group/saidevotees_worldnet/message/1877 [14-3-2007]

⁴⁷ NB As Vaudeville (1993:86) writes: ‘The Siddhas as well as the Nāths were conceived of as human beings who had acquired physical immortality and magical powers through esoteric Tantric practices: they were in fact self made gods’.

⁴⁸ E.g. <http://www.saisathyasai.com/baba/Ex-Baba.com/Witnesses/neptune.html> [30-7-2006]; also see <http://www.saiguru.net/english/articles/o2shivashakti.htm> [19-2-2006].

Mother are a father-mother, Shiva-Shakti pair⁴⁹, and Sai Baba means mother-father. The Avatar embodies in himself the qualities of the divine mother along with those of the heavenly father. In effect, the Avatar is an androgyne, a vision of wholeness encompassing both male and female aspects.

There is more here than simple referencing of Śaiva traditions—though these are important—in imbuing his name with the meaning given here, Sathya Sai Baba connects it (through resemblance and folk-etymology) to an epithet of Śiva:

Consider the meaning of the name, Sai Baba. Sa means ‘Divine;’ ai or ayi means ‘mother’ and Baba means father. The Name indicates the Divine Mother and Father, just as *Saamba-shiva*, which also means the Divine Mother and Father⁵⁰.

And he elsewhere refers to himself as ‘Siva Sakti Atmaka Swaroopa’⁵¹ (the embodiment of the spirit(s) of Shiva and Shakti); or portrays himself as an avatar of feminine aspect of Divinity alone (cf. Bowen (1985), p.201): ‘Love has incarnated as Sri Devi, Sai Devi, the Sai Mother’⁵².

Critics of Sathya Sai Baba have tied his claims to an androgynous identity to his (alleged) homosexual practices—Nagel, in particular, citing Swallow, emphasizes the existence of much traditional “erotic” symbolism surrounding the figures of Śiva and Śakti⁵³. We must note in this regard, however, that, in terms of Sathya Sai Baba’s own (exoteric) teachings at least, parental (disciplinary and nurturing) imagery clearly predominates over the erotic aspects identified by Swallow (1982:137ff.). Sathya Sai Baba goes on from above quotation, for example, to say:

Your physical parents exhibit love with a dose of selfishness; but this Sai “Mother and Father” showers affections or reprimands, only for leading you towards victory in the struggle for self-realisation [(19-6-1974) S12 38:229].

And, again, this type of understanding is typical of modern Indian avatars—Bassuk (1987b:100) sees a ‘mytheme’ of avatar ideas in the taking of a ‘DIVINE NAME’ and acting as a ‘PARENT FIGURE’.

We should also note that divine androgyny—whilst obviously resonating with Śaiva traditions—is by no means incompatible with Vaiṣṇava understandings. In keeping with what I cited earlier in this regard (p.221 above), Matchett (2001:90) observes that the *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa* (1.9.142-5) states that (invariably) ‘when the God of gods Janārdana [Viṣṇu], the master of the universe, makes his descent, then Śrī

⁴⁹ Parrinder (1970:108) notes that Sarada Devī too saw herself and Ramakrishna as a Śiva-Śakti pair.

⁵⁰ Sathya Sai Baba (19-6-1974) S12 38:229

⁵¹ SSB (1972) 138

⁵² Sathya Sai Baba (18-10-1991) S24 25:276

⁵³ <http://www.saiguru.net/english/articles/o2shivashakti.htm> [19-02-2006]; see also n.56 below.

[His wife/the Goddess] is his companion'⁵⁴. And, in some later Vaiṣṇava traditions, the pairing of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa plays a dominant role—indeed, as Parrinder (1970:85) notes, these two are described as ‘appearing in one body as Chaitanya’. Whilst Sathya Sai Baba, when speaking of Caitanya, most often relates anecdotes that portray him simply as an ideal devotee (e.g. C 107-108), he does on occasion see him alongside Rāma and Kṛṣṇa as being an avatar⁵⁵, and these two viewpoints are not necessarily contradictory—Caitanya’s followers generally portray a major purpose of his avatar to be that of teaching devotion by his own example. And they certainly did regard him as an avatar—Tony Stewart (1994:232) notes that he was variously portrayed as ‘*avatāra* (*yuga-avatāra*; *līlā-avatāra*, *kalā* or *aṃśa* of Nārāyaṇa); *svayam bhagavān*, the complete godhead; or the androgynous dual incarnation of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa’⁵⁶.

From what we have seen in this section, we may at least conclude that some key aspects of Sathya Sai Baba’s persona and teachings very much parallel the ideas and personae of earlier practitioners of Indian devotional (and ecstatic) traditions. This is not (necessarily) to posit any direct influence of their ideas upon him, but simply to suggest that, when placed in this context, his ideas seem rather less extraordinary than they otherwise would, and thus, perhaps, are made more comprehensible. This is all the more the case since it seems likely that Sathya Sai Baba has practiced many of the techniques that he preaches. Given that, to all appearances at least, these are powerful energetic “spiritual” experiences and/or practices designed to elicit such experiences, this is about the best that I can hope to do with such material here.

Some of the material that we will encounter in the next section, though generally less esoteric, is similarly indeterminate, but, for the same reason, I would argue, it is worth noting nonetheless. There are a number of potential parallels between Sathya Sai Baba’s ideas and a variety of medieval South Indian contexts—we have already seen something of this in regard to devotion, but there are also some noteworthy geographical and political factors, as well some as other significant religious elements. These, then, I will investigate in the next section.

⁵⁴ NB Dandekar (1979:156) describes the *R̥g-Vedic* Puruṣa too as a ‘hermaphrodite’, and notes paired male and female creator deities to be common one in the *R̥g-Veda*.

⁵⁵ Sathya Sai Baba (28-7-1967) S7 25:141-142

⁵⁶ See also Kinsley (1979), pp.109-110; 206ff. NB On *svayam bhagavān* see p.219 above;

4.6 South Indian Influences

Perhaps, you thought I was an Aandhra or a South Indian! The whole world is My Mansion; it has many rooms, each State being just one room in that Mansion of Mine.¹

Whilst, as the above quotation indicates, Sathya Sai Baba has often done his best to efface all traces of a parochial identity from his persona, such traces, as we have already seen (especially in Sections 2.2, 3.5 & 4.5) have the potential to illuminate some facets of this persona. In this and the following section, then, I will search for possible forerunners to Sathya Sai Baba's avatar ideas in specifically South Indian sources—focussing, where possible, upon the geographical locale of what is today Andhra Pradesh and, further, upon the region of 'Rayalaseema', in which his local district, 'Anantapur', and his home town, 'Puttaparthi' are situated (Fig.23).

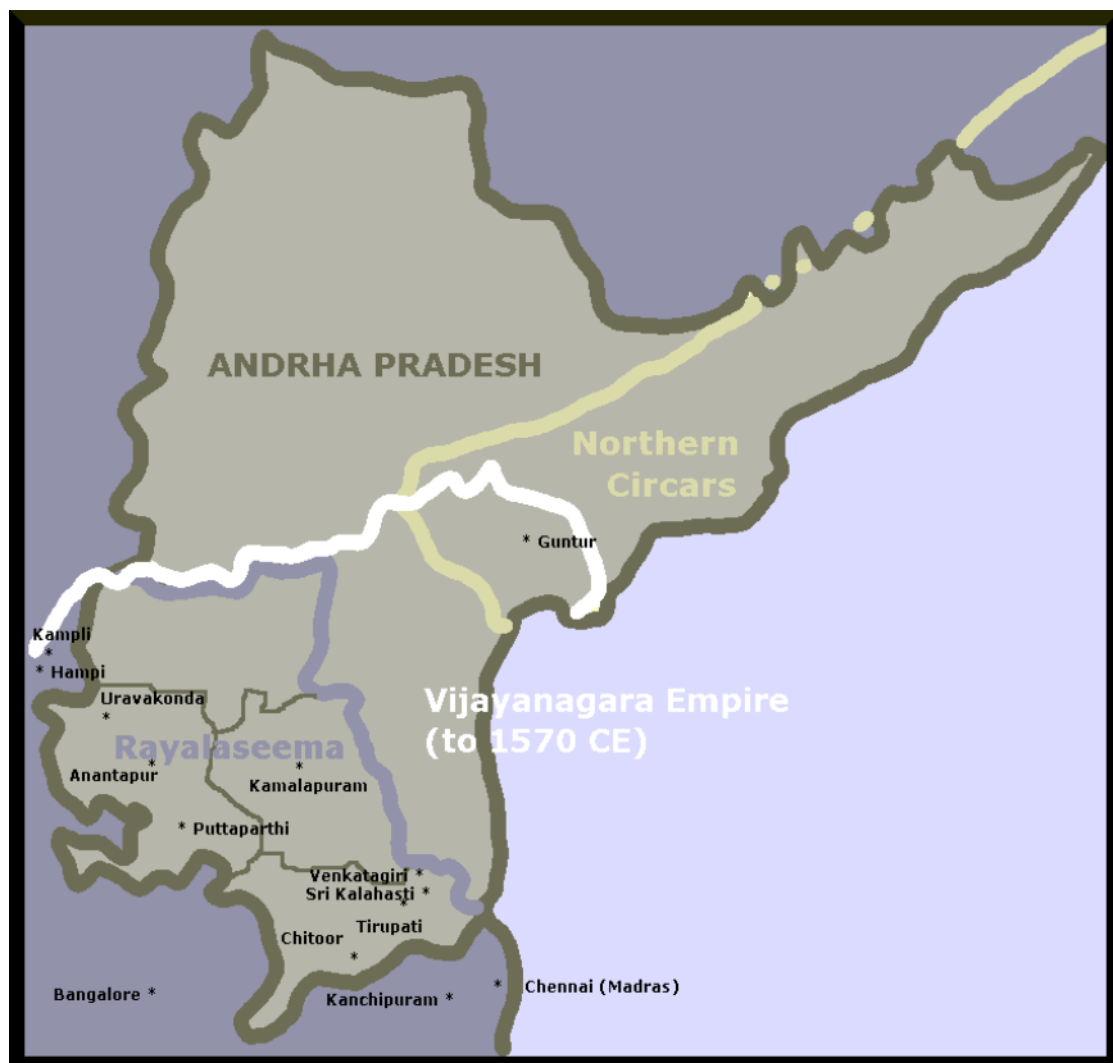


Fig.23 The State of Andhra Pradesh (cp. Fig.3b), region of Rayalaseema and Anantapur district in which Puttaparthi is situated. I have marked: the northeastern boundary of the important Hindu empire of Vijayanagara; the area, known to the British as the “Northern Circars”, from which Sathya Sai Baba's caste group are said to have come; and a number of towns to which I will refer.

¹ Sathya Sai Baba (30-4-1961) S2 8:32

Cynthia Talbot (2001:4) writes that Andhra Pradesh:

did not attain its current form until 1956, as a result of administrative reorganization of state boundaries along linguistic lines. But defined not as the modern state called Andhra Pradesh (“Andhra province”) but rather as the territory inhabited by the Telugu-speaking people, Andhra has a history stretching back more than a millennium.

Sources in this regard are hard to come by, for, as Talbot (2001:4) writes, ‘the region of Andhra’ is ‘one of the least studied parts of the subcontinent’, but, as mentioned above, it is interesting to at least attempt to outline something of a more specifically local context for Sathya Sai Baba’s ideas than those upon which we have hitherto been focussing. As we will see, several themes occur in Āndhra and (more general South Indian) history, including some themes that we have already encountered (especially inclusivism, sacred kingship and the elevated status of poets), that likely contributed to the successful deployment and development of avatar ideas in these regions, and, I will argue, at least in a general or partial sense, Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar persona can be seen as a continuity of these themes.

Kesavan Veluthat (1993:56-58) notes of a number of South Indian kings of the 6th to 13th centuries CE, that they:

were attributed divinity by various means... the king was always referred to as the husband (*bhartā*) of the Earth and of Prosperity... a clear attribute of Viṣṇu... the king was equated... with Śiva, ...is stated to be the very human incarnation of Nara-simha (Viṣṇu) himself, is equated with Mahēndra [Indra]... Trivikrama [Vāmana].

Not that South Indian kings seem to have been exceptionally interested in religious matters in general—as Richard Eaton (2005:15) notes, inscriptional evidence generally presents them as being more interested in boasting of their military conquests than their ‘piety or devotion’—but they clearly were, in some instances at least, very much portrayed as, and even treated as, gods. Certainly, as Konduri Sarojini Devi² (1990:17,18) shows, from early times, the Vijayanagara empire (1336-1570CE), which once encompassed Rayalaseema (see Fig.23)³, was conceptually linked to ideas of divine sovereignty, and several of the kings of Vijayanagara were themselves described as avatars of Viṣṇu—especially in the role of ‘protector of Dharma or custodian of Dharma’. To give some specific examples, Devi

² NB Due to the paucity of high-quality academic sources on the history of Andhra Pradesh (noted above), I will refer to a number of lower-quality, dated, or popular works on this topic, noting, as I progress, whatever problems may become apparent with the conclusions or data that they present—although such “problems” can themselves be important to understanding popular views of history.

³ On Vijayanagara, see pp.286ff. below. NB The name Rayalaseema, which means something like “the frontier of the realm”, harks back to this time.

(1990:80) notes that Sālūva Narasimha (1485-1491 CE), founder of the second dynasty of Vijayanagara, was regarded as an incarnation of the Narasimha avatar⁴, and Anila Verghese (1995:43,51) writes that, in Vijayanagara: ‘From the early fifteenth century A.D. onwards the cult of Rāma gained in popularity and enjoyed the patronage of both the court and the populace... a homology was established between Rāma and the king. ...Ramachandra [Rāma] was conceived [of] as being ‘within’ the king, ‘empowering’ or ‘generating’ his activities’.

This is typical of what we have seen of sacred kingship; Fritz and Michell (1991:11) reiterate in this context that:

the worlds of kings and gods are not separate domains; on the contrary, rulers become transcendent figures, while deities are treated as regal personalities. This fluid boundary between divine and royal realms is a dominant theme at Vijayanagara.

And such views occur in some later medieval contexts also—Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam (1992:172,186-202), writing of 16th to 18th century kingship in Tamilnadu (Fig.3a), note cases in which the king is portrayed as ‘the son of the god’ or is explicitly portrayed as an avatar. They see ‘the entire atmosphere of the court infused with the fragrance of divine service’, citing court poetry as ‘seemingly indiscriminately’ portraying a sort of ‘exclusive devotion (*kevala-bhakti*)’ towards king and deity alike, and further noting that ritual worship of the king was on a par with that directed to the gods. They conclude that:

The king is an individualized, eroticized divinity, literally incarnate in human form.... Even the god in his shrine depends on his royal servant; the mythic paradigm of the avatar is both superimposed upon and effectively superseded by its tangible human substitute. Not the remembered world of the classical texts, with their distant, lucid prototypes, but the public symbol rich in present substance [i.e. the king] is experienced as divine.

Much of this last passage could just as well characterize Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar persona; the fact of the divinity of such human figures having once been accepted in his locale (and of suitable paradigms of divine service towards them having been developed) can only have facilitated his avatar claim.

Furthermore, in keeping with the general overlap between poets (or bards) and kings that we noted earlier, Narayana Rao et al. (1992:187-188) write that:

Often poets and kings, patrons and patronized, have collapsed into a unity; the king

⁴ NB G.S. Ghurye (1968:155) writes: ‘of all forms and incarnations of Vishnu except Krishna-Vasudev... Narasimha appears to have been the first to become the object of cult-worship’, and, as he goes on to note, such worship survives to this day, especially, and almost exclusively, in Andhra Pradesh. Indeed, Sathya Sai Baba often refers to this figure—although, perhaps unsurprisingly given its fierce and destructive symbolism, he does not explicitly identify himself with it.

as poet sings of his own father, the avatar, and will be sung as such by his son. The roles of ruler, minister, court-poet, and deity have converged in the refashioned, far more encompassing image of the king.

It is at least noteworthy that this type of worldview was prominent in a closer spatial and temporal proximity to Sathya Sai Baba than the similar views that I outlined earlier—all the more since, as we have seen, the traditional heraldic role of Sathya Sai Baba's caste group must have intimately involved them in such a world. Indeed, there is some suggestion that they may have been directly connected with one of the major medieval Telugu dynasties, the Kākatīyas (1175-1323 CE)⁵.

J. Durga Prasad (1988:150) writes that King Pratāparudra (r. 1289-1323) of this dynasty 'was a man of cultural tastes and pursuits. He patronised men of letters both in Sanskrit and Telugu'⁶, and interestingly, Thurston (1909:1.225,223) notes a tradition which holds that the Bhaṭṛājus—Sathya Sai Baba's caste, which (as we have seen) once fitted this description—were 'first invited south' by this figure⁷, being 'supposed to have come from the Northern Circars' (Fig.23 above). Thurston (1909:1.225) goes on to write of the Bhaṭṛājus that:

After the downfall of that kingdom they seem to have become court bards and panegyrist under the Reddi and Velama feudal chiefs, who had by that time carved out for themselves small independent principalities in the Telugu country.

I will have more to say about these "feudal chiefs" shortly.

As K.A.Nilakanta Sastri (1975:233), in his classic *History of South India*, writes, the downfall of the Kākatīyas occurred at the hands of Muslim invaders who (after several campaigns of mixed success over a period of two decades, and a five-month final siege) captured Pratāparudra and 'sent him under a strong escort to Delhi'. He never reached Delhi, and 'seems to have put an end to his own life on

⁵ NB Talbot (2001:50-51) excludes Anantapur and several other districts from the dominion of the Kākatīyas due to the absence of inscriptional evidence, but absence of such evidence does not, of course, preclude the possibility some general influence, and/or, indeed, influence due to later migrations of persons into this area after the break-up of the Kākatīya kingdom—such as may well have been the case with Sathya Sai Baba's ancestors.

⁶ NB On Pratāparudra see Richard Eaton (2005), pp.9-32. Eaton (2005:27) points out that the image of Pratāparudra as a good king and a righteous patron of religion [reflected in Prasad's account here] was largely fabricated under the auspices of an 'obscure chieftain' Prolaka Nayaka (r.1330-?)—who wished to portray himself as a successor of this figure. He notes, however, that Pratāparudra did patronize at least one Sanskrit poet, and evidently [unsurprisingly], he is portrayed in this work as a hero and deity—although, as Eaton writes: 'We cannot know whether Pratapa Rudra considered himself divine, ...if he did, such a claim would appear to be at odds with his public persona, which projected an image more of humility than of divinity.

⁷ NB Talbot (2001:207) suggests that the fact that 'the segment of Andhra society charged specifically with the preservation of historical information [the Bhaṭṛājus] believed they owed their presence in Andhra to the Kakatiyas' lends considerable credence to this tradition.

the way’⁸, and, under the Muslims (in some cases at least), as Prasad (1988:166-167) notes—citing an inscription of this era:

Brahmins were disallowed to perform their religious rites and rituals. Temples were destroyed and idols were desecrated and broken... people could not regard their money, wives and other earthly belongings as their own.

But, as Prasad (1988:173,178-179) goes on to observe, such treatment inevitably promoted backlashes—before long, ‘a movement of liberation was organised... the Velama and the Reddi chiefs were able to restore their rule’:

The Reddis played a prominent part for a century in the Post-Kakatiya Andhradesa. Having established the kingdom as a bulwark of Hinduism against Islam, they promoted and patronised Hindu institutions and art and culture. An attempt was made to present a united front to the invaders by consolidating the Hindu social order. ‘The religious observance[s] which were hitherto the exclusive privilege of the Brahmins were thrown open to all the three castes. Emphasis was laid on observance of rituals by individuals and charity’... Vedic studies were encouraged.

These reforms can perhaps be seen as a precedent for similar trajectories in subsequent reformist/revivalist movements down to and including that of Sathya Sai Baba today—in which Brahmin practices such as vedic chanting have been opened up to all of his followers, regardless of caste (and even gender) distinctions. It is true that, as I mentioned earlier, *bhakti* movements in general sought to overleap caste and gender distinctions (p.271,n.25), but we have seen that Sathya Sai Baba’s promotes more than simple *bhakti*—Brahmanical practices are not so much transcended as put to the service of fostering devotion, and/or teaching *advaita*.

This “opening up” of Brahmin practices perhaps also has roots in Kākātīya times—as a partial consequence of the then “frontier” status of much of what is now Andhra Pradesh. Eaton (2005:14-16) writes (based upon inscriptional evidence presented by Talbot) that the construction of numerous water reservoirs by the Kākātīyas and their subsidiaries ‘opened up a relatively unproductive frontier zone to both wet and dry farming’:

Such tanks formed the basis of a new economy that gradually assimilated former herders or shifting cultivators into a predominantly agrarian society. ...as is typical in frontier zones undergoing rapid change, an egalitarian social ethos seems to have pervaded upland Andhra.... The largest block of property donors [to temples] in this period were warrior-chiefs termed *nayaka* [leader], a title that could be acquired by anybody, regardless of social origins. Birth-ascribed caste rankings were notably absent in the inscriptional record. ...Nor do named subcastes (*jati*)... appear as memorable features of people’s identity, further pointing to a social landscape remarkably

⁸ NB On this see also Eaton (2005), p.21.

unaffected by Brahmanical notions of caste and hierarchy. ...social status in interior Andhra was to a great extent earned, not inherited.

One of the most oft repeated of Sathya Sai Baba's proclamations—"there is only one caste, the Caste of Humanity"⁹—can be seen (at least partially—in combination with general *bhakti* and Neo-Hindu trends) as a distant continuity of sentiments arising from these conditions.

On the subject of inscriptional evidence, we may note an observation by Talbot (2001:279,n11) that: 'Comparisons to Varaha are common in post-Kakatiya Andhra inscriptions... a Reddi record from 1403 C.E.... likens Vema Reddi to Vishnu's boar incarnation'. Whilst we have seen similar identifications made by earlier kings from other regions of India (p.144 above), it is again significant to note the presence of such traditions in contexts ever closer to that of Sathya Sai Baba. Fig.24 shows a depiction of the Boar avatar as it was adopted as a crest by the kings of the next major empire after the Kākatiyas to subsume our region of interest—the kingdom of Vijayanagara, the "City of Victory" (1336-1570 CE).



Fig.24 'VARAHA OR BOAR CREST OF THE VIJAYANAGARA KINGS'

Sarojini Devi (1990:11) suggests that [as with the case of the Velama and Reddi chiefs mentioned above] reaction against the 'distressing social and economic conditions prevailing in ...South India on account of the Muhammadan occupation' contributed to 'the foundation of the Vijayanagara Empire, devoted and dedicated to the restoration and maintenance of Hindu independence and culture', and Prasad (1988:195) cites a tradition that:

two brothers Harihara and Bukka... treasury officers ...under Prataparudra... were taken [as] captives to Delhi and were forced to embrace Islam. When the people revolted in Kampili [Fig.23 above] against the Muslim governor, the Sultan sent Harihara and Bukka to restore order in Kampili and rule the country. Soon after their arrival, they renounced Islam and embraced the old faith. Afterwards they founded the city of Vijayanagara [in the location now known as Hampi, Fig.23].

Whilst Talbot (2001:200) notes that more critical scholars have shown such traditions to be of late origin (c.16th century CE) and hence of questionable validity, the general sense of an arising in some persons involved in the early stages of the Vijayanagara empire of some sort of intense consciousness of Islam as a religion that was so different from the various "Hindu" sects as to seem strongly "other"

⁹ E.g. (24-12-1972) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/d721224.html> [3-5-2007]

perhaps holds good, and might conceivably have stimulated a new religious self-awareness at this time¹⁰.

Sarojini Devi (1990:11) suggests that the founders of Vijayanagara received ‘strong spiritual and material backing... [from] Vidyāraṇya’, a ‘great sage’ who was believed to have magical powers, including the ability to materialize gold. This ability—the goal of many an alchemist/mystic, but one which is rarely described in traditional accounts as having been actualized—is, of course, also commonly attributed to Sathya Sai Baba (e.g. Fig.15 above), not the least by himself¹¹, and Devi notes an inscription from 1386CE describing Vidyāraṇya in terms that would not seem out of place in devotee’s accounts of Sathya Sai Baba:

May the wonderful glances of Vidyāraṇya which resemble showers of camphor dust, garlands of the Kalahara flower, rays of the moon, sandal paste and waves of the milk ocean, which shower the nectar of compassion, bring you happiness. ...Can he be Brahmā? ...Can he be Viṣṇu? ...Can he be Śiva? ...the learned have come to the conclusion that Vidyāraṇya is the supreme light incarnate.

The general ideas here—the power of *darśana*; a great sage as an avatar of the supreme—are of course extremely common India-wide¹², but, yet again, it is interesting to encounter them in a context comparatively local to Sathya Sai Baba. And Sathya Sai Baba does occasionally cite Vidyāraṇya—using him, for example, to lend traditional authority to an assertion that ‘non-violence, compassion, Service to the world, Charity etc.’ constitute ‘the very essence of Indian Wisdom’¹³.

Whilst, once again, as Talbot (2001:200) notes, traditions of Vidyāraṇya’s involvement in the founding of Vijayanagara are of late origin—almost certainly be-

¹⁰ NB Significantly, the first recorded Indian self-application of the term ‘Hindu’ occurs in Vijayanagara—Dwijendra Narayan Jha (2006:13) writes: ‘The earliest use of the word in the Sanskrit language occurs in a 1352 inscription of Bukka, the second ruler of Vijayanagara’s first dynasty, who described himself with a series of titles, one of them being *hindurāya suratrāna* (Sultan among Hindu kings)’. It is true that others have seen the title in question here not as evidence of an emergent Hindu identity but rather as one of many instances of ‘persianization’ that occurred in via commercial, diplomatic, and religious interactions between Vijayanagara and the Muslims. Eaton (2005:101) translates it as ‘Sultan among Indian kings’, and points out that one of the later kings of Vijayanagara ‘styled himself “Sultan of the World”’—implying that the titles in question here are primarily hyperbolic praise rather than descriptive epithets. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that Vijayanagara acted as a focus for traditions that we would now class as “Hindu”.

¹¹ See, e.g. C (1968-78) XXX 82.

¹² A comparison might be drawn here with some Śaiva traditions—one of which (c.9th century CE) David Smith (1985:273) quotes as praising Śiva’s ‘wonderful nectar-shedding gaze’. This perhaps also finds an echo in modern times in an invocation of ‘Vivekananda, a mere glance of whose eyes is enough to impart both enjoyment and liberation, who tramples with ease the myriad hordes of vice, who is the veritable Siva with the crescent moon on the forehead’ [Anon. (1987), p.vi].

¹³ SSV 147-148; cf. (6-9-1996) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/d960906.html> [23-11-2006]

ing fictions propagated by the monastery in question to court the favour of later Vijayanagara kings—it is the general sense of such traditions that is important for our concerns, the *perception* (in pre-modern traditions, not merely of modern Hindu scholars¹⁴) that Vijayanagara was a predominantly “Hindu” kingdom founded through the combination of spiritual and regal authority that we noted earlier to be closely intertwined in early avatar ideas. More to this effect, Devi cites a tradition that ‘Harihara, soon after his coronation surrendered on the advice of Vidyāranya his entire kingdom to [the] god Virūpākṣa of Haṁpi [Fig.23 above] and received it back to administer as His trustee’. Talbot (2001:87), yet again, points out that ‘the rhetorical submission of a king to a deity... may not signify his submission outside the setting of the temple’, but it is the fact that a tradition to this effect has been circulating for centuries that is important for our concerns. Such traditions, rather than actual historical verities, have most strongly shaped the popular understandings of regional history to which Sathya Sai Baba is heir.

Anila Verghese (1995:16-17) notes that ‘Virūpākṣa... was, undoubtedly, the most important deity of the city... The great Virūpākṣa... temple complex... remains an important pilgrimage centre even today’, and this temple forms the setting for a story Sathya Sai Baba narrates of his childhood in which he identifies himself with this deity. He relates this incident on the ‘golden jubilee’ of “Avatar Declaration Day”, assigning the original event to the ‘20th of October (1940)’, i.e. the day before his first public declaration of himself as “Sai Baba”¹⁵:

the Municipal Chairman took us to Hampi. Do not consider what I am going to say now as something boastful or fanciful or exaggerated. The entire party went into the Virupaksha temple. If I had said I would not come with them into the temple, others might feel angry or offended. I said I was having stomach ache and did not wish to go into the temple. ...Inside the temple, *harathi* [the benediction, accompanied by the ritual waving of a camphor flame] was being offered to the deity, but Virupaksha was not there! Only Raju [i.e. Sathya Sai Baba himself] was in the sanctum!¹⁶

Sathya Sai Baba goes on to talk of the unity of religions and religious tolerance,

¹⁴ Cf. Eaton (2005), p.103. Eaton writes that ‘the history of the early modern Deccan is to some extent a prisoner of modern politics’, and “to some extent”, it no doubt is—the Indian scholars (presumably of Hindu extraction) who I have cited here give the impression of identifying more strongly with Hindu traditions than Eaton does with Islam (his speciality)—but, in light of what we have seen, and will further see here, we must conclude that to see any strong alignment of Vijayanagara with Hindu traditions as ‘spurious’ (Eaton cites Stein to this effect) is surely to overstate the case.

¹⁵ NB There is some debate as to the exact date of this declaration, Padmanaban (2000:160,n64) concludes it to be 21 October 1943.

¹⁶ (20-10-1990) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume23/sss23-29.pdf> [7-3-2007] NB For more details of this supposed incident see LIMF 143ff.

but the above incident itself is perhaps more an example of transcendent inclusivism—the figure of “Raju” completely supersedes the idol of Virūpākṣa¹⁷. Whatever else may have happened on that day, it was also important for the development of Sathya Sai Baba’s religious persona in that, as Padmanaban (2000:146) writes, the young Raju subsequently lost a golden collar pin that was presented to him by the Municipal Chairman:

Sathya Sai Baba relates that he then sang a song “...while going to school after returning from Hampi; Baba’s ‘collar pin’ could not be found. That day was the day of Transformation... The link with worldly ties has gone in the form of the pin...”.

This comparatively trivial event evidently looms larger in Sathya Sai Baba’s eyes than his identification of himself with Virūpākṣa, but he does not connect it in any way with his divine persona, and there is not much more that I can say of it here.

Verghese (1995:167) notes that Virūpākṣa is ‘a form of Śiva’, and Sarojini Devi (1990:49) notes the presence in Vijayanagara of: ‘Almost all the well known schools and cults of Śaivism’, and indeed, generally speaking, South India has been a stronghold of Śiva worship. Of note for our concerns is the fact that one of the major Śaiva sects, the “Pāśupata School’... was founded as early as the first century CE by one ‘Lakulīśa who was considered an incarnation of Śiva’. Bassuk (1987b:133) asserts that: ‘Among worshippers of Shiva there are no Avatars because Shiva, having no karma, has no need to incarnate’, but Vaiṣṇavas similarly hold that their deity is free from *karma*¹⁸ and as incarnating nonetheless. Bassuk does note that ‘in Vaishnava tradition it is believed that Shiva does incarnate, and the *Kurma Purana* names 28 Avatars of Shiva’, but, over and above this, as Christudhas Retnadas (1998:206-207)—in his *Analysis of the Concept of Avatar in South Indian Tamil Hindu Culture*—writes, even in (South Indian) Śaiva contexts:

Like Vishnu, Siva is pictured as god interested in humanity. ...[And] manifests himself in different aspects of his power... named as ‘lilamurti’, “playful manifestations”.... (1) The beneficent manifestation, Anugrahamurti (2) The destructive manifestation, Samharamurti (3) The vagrant mendicant, Bhiksatamurti (4) The lord of dancers, Nattiamurti (5) The great lord, Mahesamurti....

Whilst Sathya Sai Baba makes no reference to any of these forms, his presentation

¹⁷ The substitution portrayed in the story here is admittedly temporary—but, in Sathya Sai Baba later cult, his own divine persona overshadows that of most other deities, and indeed he makes no other reference in his speeches to Hampi. When he does relate similar stories of himself appearing in place of various traditional idols (e.g. that of Veṅkaṭeśvara at Tirupati, mentioned above) his point is not that one might as well worship these idols, but that one should not have bothered making a pilgrimage to such places when one has access to him.

¹⁸ See, e.g. Parrinder (1970), p.225.

of himself as an avatar in Śaiva terms is at least in keeping with the general sense of such traditions. And, in some cases, these *are* very much understood to be embodied deities, rather than mere “manifestations” of the type more usually attributed to Śiva—Retnadas (1998:208) notes that they possess a body ‘composed of the deity’s own sakti’, and ‘a historical character... having “name and native place and parents, ...needing sleep and food, and knowing pain and pleasure”’. Significantly also, in light of what we saw in the previous section, Śiva’s avatars are often portrayed as androgynous—Retnadas cites one tradition in which: ‘He who holds in His side the Lady (Uma, Siva’s spouse, the “other half of Him”) whose fair brow is as the moon has, for men’s salvation manifested Himself’. And androgynous manifestations much feature in traditional iconology also—Shanti Lal Nagar (1994:184,189), in a study of *Siva in art, literature, and thought*, describes the most famous type of these: ‘Ardhanārīśvara is the form of Śiva in which the god is depicted with his consort Pārvatī in a single human body’.

One might imagine that at least something of the general ambience created by such traditions contributes to (at least the acceptance of) Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar persona. And various echoes of Vaiṣṇava avatar traditions embedded in South Indian folk culture can perhaps be viewed in the same light. Vinjamuri Seetha Devi (1985:10-12) in a survey of *Folk Music of Andhra Pradesh*, writes of:

melodious and popular Telugu lullabies... on the lips of every Andhra mother... addressed by the mother to the divine child Achyutha or Krishna... the cradle in which she lulls Him to sleep is the entire universe and the four chains to which it is fastened are the four Vedas... she describes Krishna’s memorable birth—how he incarnated on earth.

Seetha Devi (1985:39-42) also writes of various folk songs, ‘each of several hundreds of lines in length’, that are sung by women while working or feeding their children, and which ‘depict the exploits and achievements of Sri Rama or Sri Krishna or celebrate in a new way the episodes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata’. It is hard to imagine a more receptive environment for aspiring avatars—this must have contributed, at least to some extent, to Sathya Sai Baba’s rise to this status—and certainly, as we will see in the next chapter, many of the major contemporary avatar figures hail from South India¹⁹.

Not only did both Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava avatar(-like) ideas flourish in South India,

¹⁹ NB Also, as Shepherd (2005:142) notes, Meher Baba (on whom see p.353 below), a Zoroastrian from Maharashtra, only made his first ‘public announcement of his credentials’ (as avatar) after a ‘darshan tour in Andhra’ in the course of which ‘he became feted by many Hindus as the *avatar*’.

but these two streams of thought often combined therein—albeit sometimes only with the assistance of (advaitic) transcendent inclusivism. Verghese (1995:4), writing on *Religious Traditions at Vijayanagara*, notes in this connection the strong influence of: ‘The two important Advaita *maṭhas* [monasteries] at Śrīṅgēri [Fig.14] and Kāñchīpuram [Fig.23], besides a number of others’, and Angelika Malinar (2001:93,94) notes that ‘one of the most popular’ hagiographical accounts of Śaṅkara, the *Śaṅkara-Digvijaya*, seems to have arisen amidst ‘the historical context of the Vijayanagara empire’. Malinar (2001:97-99) writes that this work depicts ‘Śaṅkara as an embodiment (*avatāra*) of Śiva’, but also as ‘the true ‘highest abode of Viṣṇu’ (*viṣṇuparamaṇ-padam...*), surpassing even Viṣṇu’s ten incarnations... he has become the true four-armed Hari of the Kaliyuga’. Śaṅkara’s persona transcends but includes Śiva and the avatars. She concludes that ‘though he is neither the first nor the last *avatāra*, through his blending of Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava elements in his *avatāra* identity Śaṅkara can be distinguished from other *avatāras*’. As we have seen, both Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava elements are also prominent in Sathya Sai Baba’s persona, and, whilst we also saw that a blending of these elements is characteristic of avatar ideas in general, the fact that this is especially highlighted in South Indian contexts in the case of Śaṅkara—a figure whom Sathya Sai Baba holds in very high regard—is at least noteworthy.

The legacy of Vijayanagara thus perhaps lives on, at least to a small extent, in Sathya Sai Baba’s cult, though the empire itself eventually fell to the imperial aspirations of the Muslim rulers in the north. Talbot (2001:196) writes that its power:

collapsed dramatically after defeat in the 1565 battle of Talikota... at the hands of a confederacy of Muslim armies. The capital city was sacked soon thereafter, and much of the kingdom’s original base in Karnataka was abandoned. The leaders of Vijayanagara’s last dynasty, the Aravidus, retrenched as well as they could in southern Andhra... The new Vijayanagara center in Penugonda (Anantapur District) soon came under attack from... the northwest, and the capital was shifted to Chandragiri in ...Chittoor. ...the Qutb Shahs made major advances down the coast during the early 1640s. By the mid sixteenth [*sic*] century, the last Vijayanagara king had to flee Andhra, all of which was now under the nominal hegemony of Muslim polities.

The final phases of Vijayanagara were thus played out in close proximity to the area now inhabited by Sathya Sai Baba (for Penugonda/Penukonda, see Fig.3a above; Chandragiri is adjacent to Tirupati in the Chittoor district—see Fig.23).

Moreover, Prasad (1988:258) writes that ‘the Marathas under Shivaji continued the Vijayanagara traditions’, and, although Burton Stein (1989:146) concludes this postulated continuity to be spurious—derived from the interests of ‘Indian nation-

alist historians' and based upon general similarities dating to earlier times—Śivāji (1627-1680) certainly has a significant place in the recent popular imagination as a champion of "Hinduism" against foreign interests²⁰. Sathya Sai Baba, certainly, makes several references to him as an ideal king²¹, and even goes so far as to specifically coordinate him to his own mission. On inaugurating his Academy of Vedic Scholars (see p.91 above), as Kasturi (Part II:54-55) reports:

"Bhavani" said Baba, "gave a sword into the hands of the Emperor Sivaji commissioning him to venture forth and uphold Hinduism; this "Siva-Shakti" [i.e. Sathya Sai Baba himself] is today giving these Pundits the sword of Courage and commissioning them to go forth and revive Dharma in the world".

Sathya Sai Baba homologizes himself to the Goddess (Bhavānī = Śakti)—who is fabled to have appeared to Śivāji—and coordinates Śivāji's mission with his own. This is a coordinating, and not strongly subordinating, inclusivism—Sathya Sai Baba goes on to say of the Pundits (who he has homologized to Śivāji): 'Honouring them is honouring Me; neglecting them, is... as foolish as neglecting me'²². Śivāji here serves as a patriotic figure well known India-wide, but it is perhaps noteworthy that the borders of an outpost/alliance that Śivāji maintained around Bangalore came close to the environs of what is now Puttaparthi²³—it is conceivable that, accordingly, something of the spirit of his ideals persists strongly in this area.

We may further note in this regard that, after the fall of Vijayanagara²⁴, as Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman (2006:xiv) observe:

Throughout the eastern Deccan, during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Velama and Reddi lineages, as well as warriors from farther afield (Karnataka, Bundelkhand, and even as far north as Afghanistan), were carving out more or less autonomous states.... European powers were also beginning to impinge on these polities from their footholds on the coasts. But in the interior, in the small towns and royal courts of Rayalasima, a characteristic Deccani ethos survived, rooted in memories of even earlier, Kakatiya-period cultural forms.

There are thus grounds for some continuity even into these later times of the ide-

²⁰ See, e.g.; Eric Sharpe (1975), pp.57-58; David Smith (2003), p.62.

²¹ E.g. Sathya Sai Baba has Śivāji humbly approach Rāmdās (mentioned p.266 above), who tells him: 'You should consider that the kingdom really belongs to God and that you are only "His instrument or trustee administering the kingdom on His behalf."' (19-3-1993) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume26/ss26-10.pdf> [12-7-2007]

²² Sathya Sai Baba (21-10-1963) S3 29:171

²³ See C.Collin Davies (1959), p.49. On Śivāji see: Jadunath Sarkar (1992); James Laine (2003).

²⁴ NB I have referred above to much of the major scholarship on Vijayanagara, but this is a much-studied topic, and a few additional works are listed online in a *General Bibliography for Vijayanagara* at http://www.archaeos.org/vmp/download/Vijayanagara_References.pdf [27-3-2007].

als that I outlined earlier. And, significantly also, conditions were such that an unprecedented degree of innovation and flexibility was engendered in respect to these ideals—Narayana Rao and Shulman write that:

In these remote, miniature polities, often ruled by self-made men drawn from communities newly emergent on the political scene, intellectual and artistic life could be very intense. These little kings often depended more on their poets than vice versa: the poet held in his hands, or on his tongue, the ruler's tenuous hope for fame and status. For their part, multilingual poets and their audiences created a communicative space that connected disparate locales and cultural milieux, a space in which there was room for remarkable experimentation and innovation.

Against this background, we might imagine that Sathya Sai Baba's poetic/bardic caste group continued to flourish, perhaps until British rule took firm hold at the end of the eighteenth century—what I have tagged as the beginning of the “modern” period in India (see p.124 above).

Interestingly, as I indicated earlier, Narayana Rao and Shulman (2006:xiii-xv) identify a form of indigenous (proto-)modernity in the eastern Deccan, even in the 16th and 17th centuries, and, in light of the controversy that we saw earlier as to how “modern” Sathya Sai Baba's teachings may be—it is noteworthy that he is (at least potentially) heir to such a worldview. As we will see in the next chapter, however, it is the influence of the more usual sense of “modernity” in India—that arising from encounters with Western ideas and first flourishing in northern India—that is most prominent in his teachings. And, as we will see in the next chapter, even these “modern” elements, are usually treated by him in a very “traditional” manner. What we have seen previously of his extensive affinities with ancient avatar (and avatar-related) ideas, and what we have seen in this chapter of his broad affinity with such ideas in their passage through medieval mythological, philosophical, devotional and South Indian contexts, proves to be in keeping with what we will conclude to be his dominant orientation—that of a “traditionalist”.

5. MODERN MILIEUX

Modern civilisation coarsens the human heart;
it turns even the finest brain to worthless clay and
induces man to take to false and incorrect ways in life.¹

Sathya Sai Baba is no modernist—and yet, as we saw earlier (Section 1.4 above), there has been some discussion as to how he ought to be categorized in this regard. Babb (1986:160) notes that Sathya Sai Baba’s devotees ‘are often people who better than any other represent the worldwide culture of middle-class modernity in its Indian form’, and he suggests that Sathya Sai Baba’s persona caters to this fact². Babb does not, however, tie this assertion to any specific examples in Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings—this, I can attempt to do hereunder. As we will see, whilst a few examples bear out Babb’s observation³, the majority of Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings show him to be very much a traditionalist. Indeed, Babb himself goes on from the above to suggest that: ‘At a deeper level... there is something very ancient about Sathya Sai Baba’s persona’. I use the term “traditionalist” here more or less as it is derived by Halbfass (1988:219) from Hacker—who:

divided modern Indian thought... into “Neo-Hinduism” and “surviving traditional Hinduism.” ...he avoids the terms “Renaissance” and “Reformation”, so preferred by other authors.

Halbfass often uses ‘Traditionalism’ for “surviving traditional Hinduism”⁴ (this latter presumably being too unwieldy), and, in contrast to its prospective antonyms, “traditionalism” is relatively unproblematic (or, at least, no more problematic than the term “tradition” itself, cf. p.74 above). But some antonym seems necessary.

Thus, for example, whilst Gwilym Beckerlegge (2004:140) notes the view of Sumit Sarkar (1997:160-161) that the ‘Hindu Renaissance’, like other ‘renaissances’ [‘not excepting the Italian prototype’], is largely a retrospectively applied intellectual construct, and problematic for that reason, he continues to use this term nonetheless—it is, after all, by now firmly entrenched in scholarly writings as descriptive of the phenomenon in question here, and he notes that ‘reference was popularly made in nineteenth-century Bengal to a ‘new age’ or ‘awakening’—a fact which has by some been seen as justifying the appellation “renaissance”. The

¹ Sathya Sai Baba, SSSVK 5

² See also Babb (1987), p.185.

³ NB Others have made the same, or even stronger assertions in this regard—see Section 1.4 above.

⁴ For some prominent examples of, and brief reflections on, ‘surviving traditional Hinduism’ (/Traditionalism), see Halbfass (1988), pp.257-260.

most popular alternative term, “Neo-Hinduism”, is also an academic construct—significantly, in light of what we have seen, and will further see of the *advaita* leanings of Neo-Hinduism, Halbfass (1988:222) points out that only the term ‘Neo-Vedantism’ had any currency at the time of the (retrospectively projected) advent of ‘Neo-Hinduism’. But the basic distinction between two types of modern Hinduism persists with reasonable clarity whatever terminology we may use, and, despite some problems with (which we have seen and will further see) it is often, as Halbfass (1988:221) puts it, a ‘useful and convenient’ one to draw. I will thus much invoke it hereunder—using, as appropriate to my sources, a variety of terms, although I will favour “Neo-Hinduism”⁵ and “traditionalism” (without adopting the Germanic idiom prompting capitalization this latter—Neo-Hinduism, though diverse, is more monolithic than “surviving traditional Hinduism”).

I will present (and much utilize) Hacker’s precise definitions of these terms in Section 5.2 (p.318 below), but will note now that—in accordance with these—we will see that much in Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings that would appear modern, has simply been adopted by him (and adopted in a very “traditionalist” manner) from superficial aspects of his modern milieu or from the ideas of key exponents of Neo-Hinduism. Ironically, even his statement at the head of this section is likely an echo of the views of such figures—Halbfass (1988:232) notes that the famous Neo-Hindu leader Vivekananda (1863-1902), something of whose influence upon Sathya Sai Baba we have already seen, saw modern Western nations as:

ruled by the pursuit of profit... the ideal of eating and drinking... almost borne down, half killed and degraded by political ambitions and social scheming... in spite of the sparkle and glitter of Western civilisation... I tell them to their face that it is all in vain.

And yet, in a further ironic twist, despite such assertions, Vivekananda himself was deeply and directly influenced by modern Western⁶ ways of thinking; Halbfass (1988:229), for example, describes Vivekananda’s familiarity with several seminal European ‘secular and progress-oriented’ thinkers⁷.

⁵ NB On the term “Neo-Hinduism”, see Hacker (1995), pp.229-230.

⁶ NB Here (and above, and hereunder) I use the terms “West” and “Western” in the obvious popular (if dated) sense in which Vivekananda (and Sathya Sai Baba) employ them. They, like so many of the terms I have been using (“traditional”, “Hinduism”, etc.) can be, and have been much problematized, but since they (and the other terms I just mentioned) much occur in my source material, some use of them is inevitable. And they do usefully connote some genuine (if not absolutely discrete) cultural entities. As just mentioned, I will give some precise definitions of “traditionalism” and “Neo-Hinduism”, but I will often use these terms too in a more general sense.

⁷ See also Dermot Killingley (1998); Vivienne Baumfield (1998), pp.202-205; cf. Gwilym Becker-

But Vivekananda was also strongly influenced by Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886), who was anything but “secular and progress orientated”. As we will see, Ramakrishna also claimed to embody the avatars Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, and Caitanya, and, whilst these identifications did not play a major role in Ramakrishna’s teachings, he nonetheless had a considerable amount to say on ideas of the avatar—some of which we will see to find significant reflections (with him sometimes even being specifically mentioned) in Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings. Ramakrishna also contributed in no small measure to the theme of inclusivism, for which we have seen a background in earlier traditions, but which we will see to be especially prominent in Neo-Hinduism. Though he himself was little influenced by Western ideals, and whilst (as we will see) his inclusivism is not typical of Neo-Hindu transcendent inclusivism, it certainly did stimulate the development of this.

Other early significant figures who we will encounter in this regard include the Bengali reformers Rammohun Roy (1772-1833) and Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905), who were much influenced by Western ideals, and the Gujarati monk Swami Dayananda (1824-1883), who was more of a vedic “revivalist”, but was certainly touched by the spirit of his times. The most influential disciples of Ramakrishna were his wife Sarada Devi (1854-1920) “The Holy Mother” (who also claimed to be, and was much regarded as an avatar) and Vivekananda—who Ramakrishna regarded as a sort of co-avatar or ‘eternal companion’ to himself⁸. Whilst Vivekananda never himself claimed avatar status, he contributed much to Ramakrishna’s avatar persona and much in the way of inclusivistic views. Sathya Sai Baba refers to these two somewhat less than he does to Ramakrishna, and presents them as ideals for his devotees to emulate, rather than as avatars⁹, but, as we have seen, and will further see, the ideas of Vivekananda in particular have had a considerable influence upon him. Vivekananda especially sought to foster indigenous pride in the classical forms of “Hindu” traditions, stimulating—along with, and in continuity to, the other figures who I have thus far mentioned—the rise of Hindu Nationalism and “Neo-Hinduism” (as seen in opposition to “surviving traditional Hinduism” or “traditionalism”). These figures, and these themes, I will address especially in the first two sections of this chapter—in the second of these sections, focussing more on Hindu Nationalism and traditionalism.

legge (1998), p.169.

⁸ Isherwood (1965), p.199.

⁹ E.g. SSS X 139 (1-1-1978); SSS X 153 (19-3-1978). NB Sathya Sai Baba makes no reference to Rammohun Roy or Debendranath Tagore, but these two are important to Neo-Hinduism as a whole.

Another prominent figure to have influenced Sathya Sai Baba is Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950)—another Bengali, and another modern claimant to avatar status. Aurobindo was evidently himself influenced by the ideas of Ramakrishna—who he regarded as a major avatar¹⁰, and, as Halbfass (1988:248) notes, by Vivekananda—whose disembodied voice he claimed to have heard instructing him ‘constantly’ for two weeks of a year-long incarceration to which he was subjected by the British for his advocacy of revolutionary Indian nationalism¹¹. But Aurobindo was also very much influenced by Western ideas, even more so than Vivekananda. He lived for fourteen years in England¹², and imbibed popular European spiritualistic and occult ideas—especially through his “co-Avatar”, Egyptian-born Mira Richard (/Alfassa), better known as “The Mother” (1878-1973). Bassuk (1987a:82) writes that ‘According to Aurobindo he and the Mother are really one, but are manifested as two, the divine Shiva and the energy *Shakti*’—a traditional duo of deities who we have already encountered in Sathya Sai Baba’s persona. But Aurobindo (1970:152) also ascribes to ‘a more mystical view of Avatarhood which supposes that a human soul calls down this descent into himself and is either possessed by the divine consciousness or becomes an effective reflection or channel of it’. And, as we will see, similar understandings pervade the influential ideas of the “Theosophical Society”, which was spearheaded by European occultists, but which set up base in India towards the end of the nineteenth century. Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986) in particular was groomed by the Society to fulfil the avatar(-like) role of “World Teacher” (i.e. *jagadguru*—after Śaṅkara, p.140 above¹³)—and, as we will see, he did take upon himself this identity, albeit temporarily. It is significant that some of Krishnamurti’s followers were amongst the earliest of Sathya Sai Baba’s Western devotees, and certainly, on an unconscious level at least, the expectation of the immanent arrival of a saviour-figure that was much fostered by the Theosophical Society must have contributed in a general way to Sathya Sai Baba’s rise to this status. Krishnamurti—along with Aurobindo, the Mother, and a few other strongly Western-influenced (or indeed Western) figures—I will investi-

¹⁰ NB For Aurobindo (1958:408), he ‘was certainly quite as much an Avatar as Christ or Chaitanya’.

¹¹ NB For Aurobindo’s statements on the guidance he supposedly received from Vivekananda, see <http://intyoga.online.fr/viveka.htm> [6-1-2006]

¹² Halbfass (1988:249) writes that Aurobindo ‘returns to India from Europe and discovers his own tradition as a kind of foreigner’—this attitude, as we will see, being definitive of Neo-Hinduism (/the “Hindu Renaissance”). Significantly, a selection of Aurobindo’s teachings was recently collected under the title: *Out of the ruins of the West... India’s Rebirth*—see Aurobindo (1993).

¹³ See, e.g., http://www.anandgholap.net/Aspects_Of_Christ-AB.htm [12-7-2007]

gate in the third section of this chapter.

Finally, in the fourth section of this chapter, I will consider a number of (other) modern Indian avatars, especially twenty- and twenty-first century figures—some of whom have influenced Sathya Sai Baba, others of whom merely, in one sense or other, present parallel cases to his. We saw in Chapter 1, and more briefly at various other stages of this study, that Sathya Sai Baba often portrays himself as unique in his identity as the avatar (see also p.360 below). Occasionally, however, we find that he does bracket himself with a number of similar modern Indian religious figures. Thus, for example, he calls for followers of the various traditional orthodoxies to tolerate himself and similar figures on the grounds that any criticism of such does more harm than good to the general public image of religion—he says: ‘Whether it is Raama, Krishna, Raamakrishna, Sai Baba, Meher, Haranath¹⁴ or Sathya Sai, do not revile, even if you cannot revere’¹⁵. But, whatever Sathya Sai Baba’s view on his unique status may be (and I will reflect some more on this hereunder), some comparison of him with other prominent modern Indian religious figures—especially those that have portrayed themselves as, or have been portrayed as avatars—should be instructive. I will thus seek to compare him with such figures, with a view especially to providing some further context for understanding his avatar claim. I will revisit here Ramakrishna, Aurobindo, and Shirdi Sai Baba (who I much discussed in Chapter 2) and, in addition, will consider especially Meher Baba (1894-1969), Sri Mahaprabhuji (1828-1963), Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952), Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950), Rajneesh/Osho (1931-1990), Ammachi (1953-), Bhagavan (1949-) and Amma (1954-), Adigalar (1942-), and (not Indian, but Indian influenced) Adi Da (1939-). Other scholars—especially Forsthoefel & Humes (ed.) (2005) and Bassuk (1987a,1987b)—have given some good brief histories and summaries of typical hagiographical accounts of most of these figures, so I will not seek to repeat this exercise here. For want of space, I will focus fairly tightly upon any aspects of the personae of these figures that parallel details of Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar claim.

Admittedly, these figures, and those mentioned in connection with the other sections of this chapter, constitute but a few of many (and diverse) persons who have influenced the formation (and various formulations of) modern Hinduism¹⁶.

¹⁴ I.e. Sri (Kusuma)Haranatha (1865-1927)—an avatar figure from West Bengal—who, however, seems to elaborate little on his avatar identity (see, e.g., <http://kusumahara.com> [20-2-2007]).

¹⁵ (26-3-1965) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume05/sss05-16.pdf> [12-7-2007]

¹⁶ For a broader list of such figures (excluding contemporary figures), see Halbfass (1988), p.218.

But, as Halbfass (1988:218) puts it: ‘It would be preposterous to attempt a complete or even representative account’ of the ideas of this larger group. Halbfass settles for comment upon ‘a few important movements and leading individuals’, and he also omits any detailed consideration of contemporary figures—seeking, rather, to present a background against which such figures might be better understood. And whilst, as I have just indicated, I will focus upon a few major contemporary figures, I do not imagine this list to be exhaustive. As for the potentially relevant earlier figures, so far as I am concerned here, even to summarize the (nonetheless extensive) work of Halbfass on these is beyond my scope. I have picked out only such persons and passages as have struck me from my reading of his, and a number of other works (both primary and secondary sources) as being of significance to Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings—and those, for the most part, only inasmuch as they concern the idea of the avatar. I will also, however, as I have indicated, especially reflect upon the phenomenon of inclusivism as applied to non-Hindu religious traditions—for this impacts upon Sathya Sai Baba’s recasting of the avatar in a modern global context, and is central to Neo-Hinduism in general.

5.1 The Nativity of Neo-Hinduism

The impact of Western civilisation has given rise to certain new sects that attempt to re-form and modernise Hindu religion. Hindusim has the strength to correct their egoism and establish concord. Hinduism is the one religion that proclaims the truth that there is nothing separate from God and it proves it too.¹

I earlier discussed some of the problems with what Bharati identified as a contrast between “renaissance” and “grassroots” Hinduism (see pp.90ff. above), and the above quotation further highlights some of the difficulties engendered by this distinction. Sathya Sai Baba—who, according to Bharati (and not, as we will see, completely without justification), exemplifies the former of these categories—here seems to align himself with the latter. He portrays recent modernising movements in Hinduism as “egoistic” and suggests that they will be “corrected” by (traditional—i.e. grassroots; sc. his own version of) “Hinduism”. Yet this passage also provides further confirmation (if any were needed) that, for Sathya Sai Baba, “Hinduism” is (ultimately) synonymous with *advaita*—“there is nothing separate from God”. This is transcendent inclusivism, which, as I have already mentioned, is a typical “Hindu Renaissance” viewpoint.

Indeed, ironically (again, see p.294), Sathya Sai Baba’s criticism of “attempts to reform and modernize Hinduism” parallels the views of key Neo-Hindu thinkers—especially some that Halbfass (1988:221) notes to be the sentiments of the early Bengali reformer Rammohun Roy (1772-1833)—the ‘father of modern India’, founder of the Brāhmo Samāj (“Society dedicated to *brahman*”). Rammohun was certainly not a traditionalist—as Halbfass puts it, he:

greeted the British as instruments of Divine Providence and considered their rule over India and the introduction of a European educational system into India to be both necessary and good.

But Halbfass (1988:210) writes that, whilst Rammohun himself was criticized for his “innovation” and “modernness”, he nonetheless:

invokes the authority of the oldest and purest traditions of Hinduism; he argues polemically against ...“modern” commentators ...whose innovations, in Rammohan’s eyes, had only contributed to an obfuscation of the meaning of tradition.

Still, there *is* a difference between Rammohun’s viewpoint and that of Sathya Sai Baba. The mention of the “oldest and purest traditions of Hinduism” is significant (and invites the term “Hindu Renaissance”) whereas, for Sathya Sai Baba, “Hinduism” is very much a living tradition—one which “has the strength” (present

¹ Sathya Sai Baba (1966) S6 14:76

tense) to “establish concord”. Rammohun promoted a sort of “back to the Upaniṣads” philosophy—what D.S.Sarma (1966:45) describes as ‘a school of rational theism’, whereas, as we have seen, Sathya Sai Baba’s views contain strong mythic, epic, and devotional themes. And criticisms like those Sathya Sai Baba makes at top were also strongly voiced by some of the proponents of “traditionalist” views—Maya Warriar (2003:238,n37) writes of the ‘Sanatanists of 19th century British India who saw themselves as champions of Hindu orthodoxy, and campaigned against social and religious ‘reform’ efforts’. Or, perhaps, yet again, as I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, Sathya Sai Baba is simply echoing the exterior form of the views promoted by Neo-Hindus like Rammohun (and Dayananda, see below) without really adopting their spirit.

Rammohun was evidently regarded by some as an avatar figure—Choudhary (1981:56) writes:

‘...“His name was Legion. Hindoo Pandit, Zaburdasht Moulvi, Christian Padree [sic], the Rishi of a new Manwantara or Yuga, the Imam or Mahdi of a new Tradition, the Prophet or Nabi of a Newer Dispensation” and he was cast by at least one of his biographers as *‘A Modern Incarnation of God’*.

But this is not a status that Rammohun would have accorded to himself, for, as Choudhary (1981:59) goes on to note, it was his view that ‘the supreme Being cannot, as the scriptures declare, be defined in any form. It is beyond the possibility of any empirical determination’. Not that such views have stopped Sathya Sai Baba from identifying himself in such a manner, but Rammohun was much more philosophically orientated, concerned with logical consistency.

Indeed, as Choudhary (1981:60) notes, under the leadership of Rammohun’s successor, Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905), the ‘Ādi Brāhmo-Samāj’ (as it became known) held, as a central tenet, that ‘God never incarnates Himself’, and Parrinder (1970:100) writes that:

Forthright denial of the Avatar doctrines is found in a number of the modern movements...: ...in the official statement of the Prarthana Samāj of western India, ‘God does not incarnate himself’; and in the Ārya Samāj, ‘the doctrine of *avatāras*, or divine incarnations, is denied’.

There is obviously a major contrast in this with Sathya Sai Baba’s views. Whilst we have on occasion seen him saying similar things, we have by now seen that the overwhelming majority of his statements on the avatar idea do accord this some (at least provisional) validity. And Sathya Sai Baba never goes as far as some of these movements did—preaching against worshipping images (of avatars).

As D.S.Sarma (1966:45) describes it, after Rammohun Roy (in Gujarat, at the opposite geographical extreme of India but with some influence from key members of (offshoots of) the Brāhmo Samāj), the ‘Arya Samaj [“Society of (vedic) Aryans”²] founded by Swami Dayananda (1824-1883)’, undertook unprecedented steps in what it saw as:

reclaiming those who have gone out of the fold, making new converts, and fighting all enemies who make inroads into the Vedic religion. It takes its stand on the Vedas and Vedas alone, and ignores all the later developments. ...Curiously enough, it takes little account of the philosophy of the Upanishads, and consequently cuts itself off from the perennial sources of Hindu religious thought.

There is a major contrast here with Rammohun’s emphasis upon the Upaniṣads, and the ideas of “conversion” and “reclaiming those who have gone out of the fold” especially arose as a response to Christian missionary work trying to move Indians towards Christianity. Thus, at most, these two foundational figures of early Neo-Hinduism presented an idiosyncratic and reactionary “renaissance”.

As Gwilym Beckerlegge (2001:71) notes, Rammohun and Dayananda ‘have often been labelled respectively ‘reformer’ and ‘revivalist’, and parallels have been drawn between the movements promoted by both of these figures and the “Reformation” of Christian history. Kamakhya Choudhary (1981:68-69) writes that:

Swāmi Dayānanda... appeared before the world like a Messiah with the Gospel of knowledge—the Veda—in his hands... “I hold that the four Vedas”, Dayānanda says, “the repository of Knowledge and Religious Truths are the Word of God... They are absolutely free from error, and are an authority unto themselves”.

Though the Christian symbolism is here out-of-order—of the prominent Neo-Hindu leaders, Dayananda is exceptional in not taking to heart Christian doctrines—there is perhaps a general similarity between this view and Reformation attitudes to the Bible. As Heesterman (1978:93) puts it, Dayananda very much presented a ‘back-to-the-Vedas’ brand of Hinduism.

This certainly is “revivalism” on Dayananda’s part—I cited earlier something of Heesterman’s (1978:80) testimony to the effect that, even in traditional Hinduism: ‘The whole of *dharma*, we are told over and over again, rests on the Vedas’. But, that Dayananda’s views are by no means simply revivalist, becomes clear as Choudhary (1981:69) notes that Dayananda also saw the Vedas as encompassing ‘the fundamental principles of ‘all the scientific physical knowledge’ (including, for

² NB On the shades of meaning of the term “Aryan” (lit. “noble”, but with well known racial connotations) in this context see, e.g.: Indira Chowdhury-Sengupta (1999), p.19; Trautmann (1997). For a brief overview of Dayānanda and the Ārya Samāj, see Halbfass (1988), pp.244-246.

example, as Halbfass (1988:246) notes, ‘telecommunications’). And that Sathya Sai Baba’s own vedic revivalism (of which we saw something earlier, p.55) is mediated by Dayananda’s version is evident from his own occasional reiterations of this last idea—he claims, for example, that the *Atharva-Veda*:

embodies many technological secrets and scientific laws which were directly utilised by Westerners.³ ...Mention is made of aerial vehicles, of gravitation and of various other scientific principles and appliances [(18-2-1980) S14 47:301].

This is coordinating subordinating inclusivism of the type we encountered earlier—the point is not that technological advances are legitimated by their foreshadowing in the Vedas, but that, as Vivekananda puts it: ‘all that is necessary for the perfection of man and for attaining unto freedom is there in the Vedas. You cannot find anything new’⁴. In this view, the Vedas provide the comprehensive context for both modern technological progress and spiritual insight—Sathya Sai Baba prefaces his statement cited at the head of this section by saying: “*Vedha Dharma*... has in it the principles of all contemporary religions. ...Hindu culture ...is really World culture’⁵.

Nevertheless, I would suggest that Sathya Sai Baba is largely echoing these Neo-Hindu viewpoints as if they were traditional ones—or indeed to the extent that they accord with what we noted earlier of traditional propensities for claiming all viewpoints as parts of the Vedas. There is nothing in Sathya Sai Baba’s cult equivalent to Dayananda’s “making converts” to the “Vedic religion” or “reclaiming those who have gone out of the fold”—indeed he specifically proclaims:

I have not come to speak on behalf of any particular *dharma* (righteousness [*sic*, i.e. “religion”]), like the *Hindhu Dharma*. I have not come on any mission of publicity for any sect or creed or cause; nor have I come to collect followers for any doctrine. I have no plan to attract disciples or devotees into My fold or any fold.⁶

And, interestingly, Sathya Sai Baba sometimes invokes his avatar identity to make a point similar to this last one: ‘The *Avathaar* ...does not come to found a new creed, to breed a new faction, to install a new God. If such a thing happens, it is the consequence of the evil in man’⁷.

In this too he has perhaps been influenced by the ideas of Vivekananda—who sometimes invoked Ramakrishna’s avatar persona in this connection, concluding

³ On this popular Indian “urban myth”, see Bharati (1965).

⁴ Beckerlegge (2004), p.153. See also: Halbfass (1988), p.238; Kenneth Jones (1999), p.242.

⁵ Sathya Sai Baba (1966) S6 14:75

⁶ Sathya Sai Baba (4-7-1968) S8 22:118

⁷ Sathya Sai Baba (21-6-1979) S11 45:290-291

(in keeping with his *advaitic* transcendent inclusivism) that all sectarian divisions are invalid, and even positively harmful. Vivekananda, as Tapan Raychaudhuri (1998:4,6) writes, held that:

‘The reason for the advent of Ramakrishna [i.e. as an avatar]... was to end sectarianism in all its forms and hence the disciple could not risk founding one more sect in the name of the master’, and that ‘Hindu, Christian etc. are but different names (of the same truth). They are barriers to fraternal feelings between human beings. ...Even the best of us behave like monsters under their evil influence.

Whilst Nemai Sadhan Bose (1998:291) suggests that Vivekananda, rather than pushing ‘Hindu Supremacy’ called for ‘harmonising the Vedas, the Bible and the Koran’ (i.e. a type of coordinating (but not subordinating) inclusivism) he also notes that Vivekananda ‘wished to see a world where there would be ‘neither the Vedas, nor the Bible, nor the Koran’—i.e. transcendent inclusivism (and perhaps “advaitic imperialism”, at the culminating stage of *advaita*). And whilst we have seen something of both of these attitudes in Sathya Sai Baba’s ideas, for him, as for Vivekananda, it is this latter which predominates—indeed, Sathya Sai Baba goes on from the passage cited toward the bottom of the previous page to proclaim: ‘I have come to tell you of this Universal unitary faith, this *Aathmic* principle’. As we will see, there are some cases in which it is apparent that Sathya Sai Baba has been directly influenced by Vivekananda’s ideas, and he may have been so here, but there is nothing distinctively “Neo-Hindu” about this. This is transcendent inclusivism, which we saw to be prevalent even in traditional *advaita*.

Vivekananda himself, however, definitely was, like Rammohun and Dayananda deeply influenced by modern Western and/or Christian ideas. Still, his acceptance of avatars did tie him strongly to (what we have seen to be) one of the cornerstones of traditional “Hinduism”, whereas these other two, as I have mentioned, despite their charismatic roles, did not admit of the possibility of avatars. And, in fact, even Sarma (1966:46) opposes these two figures to what he sees as the ‘true renaissance of Hinduism’ in ‘the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886)’—who: ‘was not a scholar ; he had no book learning. All his knowledge was derived from oral tradition and his own bold experiments in religion’, and who, of course, very much accepted (and indeed embodied) the avatar idea. Sarma points out that, unlike these earlier figures, Ramakrishna, while embracing, and influenced by, other religions, ‘never cut himself off from the Hindu tradition and authority. ...he lived and taught in the precincts of a temple’. And even Bharati (1962:142) seems to regard Ramakrishna as ‘one who stood deeply rooted’ in the ‘ancient tra-

dition of Hindu monasticism'. Bharati, however, feels that Ramakrishna's movement 'has fallen victim ...to the great temptation which hovers around every religious movement inspired by personal charisma: the temptation to apotheosize the founder'. And this, for Bharati—in keeping with his view (cited above, p.93) as to the “non-canonical” status of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (the *locus classicus* of avatar ideas)—pushes Ramakrishna into the realm of “renaissance” rather than “grass-roots” Hinduism, for, as he goes on to note, ‘Ramakrishna himself gave some encouragement to his subsequent apotheosis’.

Bharati's categorization thus largely fails here. For him, Ramakrishna represents “grassroots” Hinduism only to the extent that he does not dabble in ideas that Bharati does not like. This is in line with the criticism that we earlier saw Charles White levelling at Bharati (p.90,n.15)—and indeed, here, Bharati makes it quite plain that his personal preferences are the basis of his attitude:

the notion of *avatāra* does not mean much to me, just as the word ‘father’ had meant nothing to me when I decided to abandon Christianity; in fact I detested that word—likes and dislikes just cannot be imposed on a thinking mind.

Likes and dislikes may not be able to be imposed, but they can, as discussed earlier, up to a certain point at least, be “bracketed”—although, to be fair, Bharati is here relating the story of his personal spiritual quest, and on such a quest scholarly detachment is perhaps inappropriate⁸.

Still, in our present attempt at objectivity, we might, in light of the above, justifiably (with White—cited earlier) see the “notion of *avatāra*” as more “grassroots” than Bharati imagines. Certainly, as Bharati describes it, this idea is integral to Ramakrishna's movement—despite various official and published disclaimers in this regard—and indeed, Bharati tells of his own expulsion from this movement for persistently proclaiming his above-cited viewpoint. But there is also a sense in which Ramakrishna must have been influenced by the (certainly not “grassroots”) ideas of Rammohun, which by Ramakrishna's time had surely infiltrated popular consciousness in the Bengali environment in which both of these figures flourished. Ramakrishna's proclamations, as noted by Sarma, of ‘a universal religion of which all the religions of the world are only certain aspects’ can at least partially be seen in this light. Of course, such ideas are also reminiscent of the earlier ideas to this effect that we saw in the previous chapter—and Halbfass (1988:219) notes

⁸ It is perhaps true that, as Bharati (1962:143) goes on to state, ‘it is not reason that makes one decide personally important issues’. Cf., however, Section 1.1—as mentioned thereunder, on the spiritual path under Sathya Sai Baba at least, one should endeavour to “give up likes and dislikes”.

that ‘the tenets of the essential unity and equality of religions and of a tolerance essentially intrinsic to Hinduism, both of which play a major and obvious role in Neo-Hinduism, are by no means foreign to Traditionalism’. And Ramakrishna’s avatar-identity, as promoted by his followers, certainly draws much upon traditional forms. Raychaudhuri (1999:3) notes that Vivekananda:

composed the mantra for the worship of Ramakrishna in the monastery: *sthāpakāya ca dharmasya sarvadharmasvarūpiṇe, avatāraṇiṣṭhāya rāmakṣṇāya te namaḥ* (‘We bow to Ramakrishna, the greatest of all incarnations, the founder of *dharma*, he who was the embodiment of all religions’).

We have already seen traditional precedents for most of the ideas here, and parallels to them in Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings⁹—one of these, especially, in similar terms: ‘*sarvadharmasvarūpiṇe*’ recalls Sathya Sai Baba’s presentation of himself as the ‘*sarvadhāivathwa swaruupam* (the form, which is all forms of all Gods)’. Since, as I have mentioned, Sathya Sai Baba sometimes (literally) adopts ideas of Vivekananda (and Ramakrishna) there may even be some direct influence here.

Prompting Vivekananda’s construction of him as an “embodiment of all religions”, Ramakrishna’s views of “other” religions were certainly broad:

Every man should follow his own religion. A Christian should follow Christianity, and Mohammedan Mohammedanism. For the Hindu, the ancient path, the path of the Aryan Rishis, is the best.¹⁰

But Halbfass (1988:227) writes that such views of Ramakrishna:

should not be mistaken for an example of deistic “tolerance”; instead this is one of the most impressive examples of “inclusivism” in the nineteenth century. Its very “openness” is a form of self-assertion....¹¹

Halbfass sees this as ‘an extrapolation of Hinduism itself, an answer to the Europeans coming out of the tradition of Tantric Vedānta’. In this tradition, as Dandekar (1979:116-117) describes it:

the concept of *iṣṭadevatā* [“chosen deity”] ...implies a complete freedom of choosing one’s special god and mode of worship, without, however, allowing that freedom to become in any way detrimental to other gods and other forms of worship.

And that this is inclusivism, rather than pluralism, is evident when one considers

⁹ I.e. in Kṛṣṇa and Sathya Sai Baba being portrayed as “founders (or “establishers”) of *dharma*” (pp.195,196) and as “the greatest of Avatars” (pp.219,119).

¹⁰ *Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Sharada Devi and Vivekananda* (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/saidevotees_worldnet/message/1852 [20-3-2007])—cf. Sarkar (1997), pp.323ff.

¹¹ NB On Deism, a strand of thought originating in 17th century Europe proposing a ‘religion of pure reason and suprahistorical catholicity’, see Halbfass (1988), pp.54ff. On the less than egalitarian nature of this statement of Ramakrishna, see Arvind Sharma (1979), pp.59-60.

that, whatever the deity and mode of worship, the goals of tantric worship are to implore the deity to manifest (and/or to identify oneself with the deity)—not those of Christianity or Islam (“salvation”, or eternal life in paradise).

Accordingly, Ramakrishna claimed that Jesus appeared to him and ‘passed into his body’ and that he had a vision of a ‘shining impressive personage’ (Mohammed) who ‘merged into Ishwara, and then merged into Brahman’. In the terms that I discussed in Section 4.4, Tantra provides the “complete context” for Ramakrishna’s forays into these other religions. This is coordinating inclusivism—Ramakrishna ‘remained convinced, from that day onward, that Jesus was truly a divine incarnation’, and believed that he had experienced ‘the full realization’ of Islam. But his disciples, with their stronger advaitic leanings, interpreted this last vision as proof that ‘non-dualistic Vedanta is the only valid link between the many dualistic religions. ...Unity can only be found by going deep, to the underlying, all projecting Brahman’¹²—i.e. as transcendent inclusivism, positing an “ascent” through, and transcendence of, “lower” forms of religion.

Ramakrishna’s own inclusivism, even in relation to his divine persona (i.e. though Vivekananda saw him as the “greatest of Avatars”), was very much of the coordinating variety; he understood himself as being a reincarnation of Caitanya and coordinated his disciples with those of this figure—Kripal (1995:236) writes:

Ramakrishna once saw “with open eyes” Caitanya and his disciples dancing in the temple precincts. Later, when certain disciples finally showed up at the temple, Ramakrishna would “stand up with a start,” recognising them as members of the retinue he had seen in his vision. Caitanya and his disciples had reincarnated *en masse* as Ramakrishna and his disciples.

This can be seen as a continuity of the type of thinking that we encountered at the beginning of Chapter 4 above, where I noted that some of Caitanya’s own disciples were coordinated with various *gopīs*, i.e. former associates of Kṛṣṇa. This, in turn, echoes earlier traditions—as mentioned above, Kṛṣṇa and his brother are portrayed in the epics as complementary avatars of Viṣṇu and his serpent-couch (or in some traditions as more or less equal aspects of Viṣṇu), and most of the main characters of the *Mahābhārata* are conceived of as incarnating various key figures of the vedic pantheon. We may further note that Rāma and his brothers are often similarly portrayed as incarnating complementary aspects of Viṣṇu, and that Sathya Sai Baba on occasion coordinates some of his disciples with famous spiritual luminaries—for example, telling one man that he is a reincarnation of King

¹² Isherwood (1965), pp.148,124-125.

Solomon, another that he is a reincarnation of Jesus' disciple Peter, and casting yet another as a reincarnation of Vivekananda¹³.

One generation's deities (or saints/kings etc.), it would seem, become the next generation's avatars—who in turn, in time, become deities in their own right, and, in due course, take avataric forms of their own. Ramakrishna's belief in himself as a reincarnation of Caitanya, and similarly, Sathya Sai Baba's claim, a century later, to incarnate Shirdi Sai Baba (who by then functioned, in Sathya Sai Baba's locale at least, more as a deity than as a saint or avatar), can be seen as but recent manifestations of this traditional iterative process. Presumably, as devotees become more distant (geographically and/or temporally) from an avatar figure (or perhaps from strong sources of hagiology for such a figure, including relics), some of them find it more suitable to relate that figure in the abstract—as a disembodied deity available in the present—rather than as an avatar living in some far off place and/or in days gone by (cf. R. Snell, 1994, p.3). Others, however, might not be satisfied with this, and into this environment, any suitable candidate for avatar status would obviously be welcomed.

Also, as Aditya Malik (2005:77ff.,79) indicates—noting an extremely complex series of interlocking avatars in a Rajasthani folk-tradition telling the story of an avatar by the name of Devnārāyaṇ—this might be seen as a strategy to 'broaden the intertextual spread' of any particular tradition. Malik (2005:92) writes that, in the instance that he studies at least, this:

serves as a link between different cycles of time. It provides a bridge between different periods of the past, and to the present, furnishing a framework for establishing temporal and material continuity. ...the condition of the present is perceived of as a replica of the conditions of the past: the present repeats and resembles the past. ...The narrative is, thus, couched within a discourse on time that in turn creates a discourse on the "history" of Devnārāyaṇ, and the community of people who worship him. The notion of the avatāra coupled with the notion of yugas... provides the devotees of Devnārāyaṇ with a platform for extending their cult deeply into the past.

And we might see this as being applicable more generally also—as we have seen, Sathya Sai Baba certainly uses his avatar persona (and the *yuga* system) to "extend his cult deeply into the past"—recall that his Śiva-Śakti identity is explicitly tied back to the Tretā-Yuga (p.121 above) and that he speaks, for example, of his "old *bhaktas*" from the time of Kṛṣṇa (p.121).

Bassuk (1987b:101) sees the gathering of a group of 'disciples' (in general) as a

¹³ Various Sai devotees have mentioned the first two of these to me at various times. On the latter of these cases see Murphet (1996), pp.60-66.

mytheme of the avatar traditions, but I would point out that it is also characteristic of *gurus* or indeed religious teachers in general—and thus hardly merits special mention in the case of the avatar. Bassuk sees the manifestation of this mytheme in the fact that ‘Satya Sai Baba had devotees called *bangaru* (golden ones)’, but this latter is a common term of endearment employed by Sathya Sai Baba, and does not carry the technical sense with which Bassuk imbues it (see, e.g., Aitken, 2004:175). Nevertheless, Sathya Sai Baba did have a group of early (Western) disciples—“the seven rockets”¹⁴—which does more closely fit the sense to which Bassuk is referring. But Bassuk’s mytheme would do better to refer to the idea that other prominent deities/disciples are reborn with the avatar, for this does seem to be common amongst the avatars—both traditional and modern. Indeed, further to his specifically identifying his devotees with prominent historical religious figures, Sathya Sai Baba elevates this to something of a characteristic of the avatars: ‘When *Avathaars* come, they choose the time and place, clan and the family, and they decide and bring the comrades and the co-workers’¹⁵, and Adigalar, another modern avatar figure—said to be an incarnation of the “Divine Mother” (see pp.356ff. below)—is similarly presented in this regard:

Devotees are constant companions of Divine Mother and whenever Divine Mother incarnates, the associate devotees also incarnate in order to serve the Divine Mother in different capacities.¹⁶

The utility of such pronouncements in legitimating present day avatar claims is only too obvious—they provide a direct sense of connection to past avatars and past glories. These are appeals to traditional authority.

In this connection, we might also consider what Halbfass notes to be Ramakrishna’s belief in ‘the timeless of [*sic*] presence of the *sanātana dharma* (“eternal religion”)’, a conception which harks back to at least the *Mahābhārata*—although, again, various modernist figures (including Vivekananda) often refer to it in the service of legitimating their Neo-Hindu transcendent inclusivism¹⁷ (and/or Hindu Nationalism¹⁸). Sathya Sai Baba often cites this term, and his use of it is more along the lines of the coordinating (if subtly subordinating) inclusivism of Ramakrishna. Indeed, he even uses the metaphor that we saw Halbfass identify as typi-

¹⁴ GC 126ff.

¹⁵ (9-8-1965) <http://www.ssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume05/ssso5-36.pdf> [13-4-2007]

¹⁶ <http://www.omsakthi.org/writings/avatar3.html> [20-2-2007]

¹⁷ See, for example: Halbfass (1988), pp.343-345; Doniger (1978); Hacker (1995), pp.257ff.

¹⁸ E.g., Aurobindo proclaimed: ‘The Sanatan Dharma, that is nationalism’ (Sharpe, 1975, 62).

cal of this type of inclusivism:

Born in various areas, flowing through various paths, the rivers at last reach the ocean. So too, born in different lands, practising different ways of Dharma, people reach the Ocean of the presence of the Lord, through different modes of worship. Sanathana Dharma is the central location in which all these various paths, moving in different directions, converge.¹⁹

He also, as we have seen, connects it with his avatar identity (see p.48 above).

Coordinating inclusivism of this type does not invoke specifically *advaita* ideology—it accords more with the tantric ideals outlined in connection with Ramakrishna above. And, further to this, the great diversity of the (surely “grassroots”, “surviving traditional”) village “Hinduism” of Ramakrishna’s formative years must have provided some stimulus for his later broad, coordinating views—Sarkar (1997:318) writes that:

The striking feature of Ramakrishna’s original village world... was certainly catholicity. ...[He] encountered in boyhood a multiplicity of cults.... Devotional practices easily crossed sectarian barriers and could vary within the same family.

And the same can be said of Sathya Sai Baba—we saw something of this earlier (pp.271-271), and might add here that his mother was of Śaiva extraction, while his father was of Vaiṣṇava stock. Moreover, his mother, at least, worshipped a wide variety of deities—‘She would visit the Easwara Temple on Mondays, the Sathya Bhama Temple on Tuesdays and Fridays and the Venugopalaswamy [Kṛṣṇa] and Anjaneya (Hanuman) Temples on Saturdays’²⁰. Admittedly, these are all “Hindu” deities, but we might imagine that growing up in an environment in which spiritual allegiance was given equally to a number of deities could have stimulated some of Sathya Sai Baba’s later (coordinating) inclusivism²¹.

But of course, as we have seen, it is transcendent inclusivism that predominates in Sathya Sai Baba’s views, and, whilst it is possible that he has directly derived this from the traditional *advaita* understandings that we discussed in Section 4.4, it is likely that he has to some extent been influenced in this regard by Vivekananda (who, in turn, was early influenced by the Brāhmo Samāj²², and certainly held *advaita* in the highest regard). Sarkar (1997:328) notes that the followers of

¹⁹ See, e.g., <http://www.sssbpt.info/vahinis/prema/prema17.pdf> [29-3-2007]

²⁰ LIMF 13

²¹ NB As we saw in the previous chapter in the case of various South Indian kings, and as Hanumantha Rao (1973:316-317) further notes, ‘catholicity’ of this type—in which an attempt is made ‘to revere all gods equally and see the truth in every religion’, or in which ‘the common people’ try to ‘please every god and ...displease none’—is something of a theme of Andhra history.

²² See Beckerlegge (1998), pp.169-172.

Ramakrishna had a propensity for (over-)‘emphasizing his affinities with Vedanta’, and I noted one instance of this above. Ramakrishna’s own views (as expressed in his “own” words—though we have these only through his disciples), were not, predominantly, advaitic. Sarkar (1997:327) notes that he ‘loved to reiterate his own preference for dualistic bhakti through Ramprasad’s²³ words: ‘I do not want to become sugar, for I love its taste’. But Sathya Sai Baba inverts this:

the purpose of human life is not merely to secure a vision of the Divine or to experience the bliss of that vision. Those who love sugar, must seek to become sugar itself.

“*Brahmavid Brahmaiva Bhavathi*” (The knower of Brahman becomes Brahman...).²⁴

The sense of the original metaphor is completely lost, but the force of the inversion is clear. His last proclamation here comes from *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 3:2.9, and confirms his advaitic (and traditionalist) orientation²⁵.

Ramakrishna, on the other hand, even in his occasional identification with the traditional avatars, Rāma and Kṛṣṇa (see p.346 below), commented (to Vivekananda) that this identity was ‘not in your Vedantic sense’. Bharati (1962:142), expressing his distaste, points out the obvious conclusion from this last statement that Ramakrishna *really* considered himself to be an avatar—rather than simply taking upon himself that identity as “strong medicine” (cf. p.46 above) by which to direct his followers to an understanding of *advaita*. And, certainly, as we saw witnessed by Bharati above, Ramakrishna’s followers do take him to be a *real* avatar—divine in a way that ordinary individuals are not, and never can be²⁶. Whilst, as noted earlier, for Bharati, the concept of avatars is not representative of “grass-roots” Hinduism, and thus not legitimate in its application to modern figures, we have seen it to have a long history in Hindu traditions, and that Ramakrishna (and/or his followers) do draw upon this history.

Another instance of this can be seen in the fact that, like Caitanya, Ramakrishna is viewed as an avatar in which the divine took on the role of a devotee (albeit, it is said, only for the instruction and upliftment of disciples). And there is a sense in which both of their avatar identities were portrayed as being “secret”²⁷. These

²³ NB Ramprasad Sen (1720-1781) was a popular Bengali composer of devotional songs.

²⁴ Sathya Sai Baba (23- 7-1989) S22 24:171-172

²⁵ NB This aphorism is often invoked in traditional *advaita*—including in works considered to be definitive of Śaṅkara’s own views—see, e.g., Vidyasankar Sundaresan (2002), p.32,n.37.

²⁶ NB The title of a recent account of Ramakrishna’s disciples is further indicative of this: *They lived with God : life stories of some devotees of Sri Ramakrishna* (Swami Chetanananda, 1989).

²⁷ Ramakrishna said as much about himself (see, e.g.: Bassuk (1987a), p.78), and for the followers of Caitanya: ‘An actual incarnation of God never says ‘I am God’ or ‘I am an incarnation of God’—

are strong points of contrast with Sathya Sai Baba—who, as we have seen, openly proclaims his identity as the avatar, and distances himself from his participation in devotional practices. But, as we have seen and will further see, there are many aspects of Sathya Sai Baba's avatar persona and teachings that can be seen in continuity with these figures—especially Ramakrishna. Indeed, he does seem to be directly aware of some of Ramakrishna's teachings, commenting on one of his occasional references to this figure (cited p.345): 'This is known to all who have read his life history'²⁸, i.e. implying his own knowledge of at least one of the widespread and popular hagiographical accounts of Ramakrishna's life. Sarkar (1997:288) observes (as we saw many to have done of Sathya Sai Baba) that: 'There was little obviously new in Ramakrishna's teachings', and what we have thus far seen would tend to bear this out. Sarkar does note, however, Ramakrishna's novel usage of 'parables and similes drawn from contemporary everyday rural and bhadralok [gentry] life', and we have already seen that Sathya Sai Baba's teachings display a similar fondness for such parables (e.g. p.47). Moreover, a few examples suggest some specific influences in this regard²⁹.

Ramakrishna (1965:220), hailing from Calcutta—centred on a major British port, drew inspiration from his surroundings in describing his ideas of the avatar:

As a large and powerful steamer moves swiftly over the water, towing rafts and barges in its wake, so when a Saviour³⁰ comes, he easily carries thousands to the haven of safety across the ocean of Maya.

And, though such a simile is somewhat out of place in land-locked Anantapur, Sathya Sai Baba employs it—or at least a variation upon it—to describe the capacity and importance of his own avatar:

When *mahātmas*, *yogis* and *jñānis* take birth in this world, they can liberate only a few people as per His command. They are like small boats which cannot carry heavy loads. My *avatāra* is like a big steamer. I can take any number of people. I can take them across to the other bank. I am God. All of you take this opportunity to cross over when I have come. Your only job is to get on the steamer. I, the commander of the steamer, am waiting for you. In the next two thousand years nobody will come to take you over to the other bank.³¹

Caitanya-*Caritāmṛta* 2:20.354 (<http://vedabase.net/cc/madhya/20/354/en> [8-7-2007])

²⁸ PremV 77

²⁹ See also, for example, Sathya Sai Baba (12-9-1963) S3 24:142—cf. Ramakrishna's words reported by Swami Nikhilananda (1942), p.392.

³⁰ NB Whatever Ramakrishna's Bengali terms may be (I do not know), 'Saviour' is sometimes used as an equivalent of 'Avatara' in English translations of his teachings—e.g., Parrinder (1970), p.230.

³¹ (1951-1960) SSSA 251-260 NB This can also be seen as a modernized version of the traditional

Sathya Sai Baba's main point here is to generate "oppositional charisma"—that is to say to define his divine persona over-and-against that of other figures in such a way as to increase his appeal.

It is also noteworthy that he (again) draws directly upon the law of supply-and-demand—creating a perception that the chance that they have to interact with him is extremely rare. And Ramakrishna (1965:221-222) seems to have sometimes promoted himself in a similar manner—he gives a special place to:

unique Incarnations like Chaitanya Deva, who are marked alike by Bhakti (Love) and Jnana (Knowledge) [i.e. like himself also]. It is like the sun and the moon appearing in the firmament at one and the same time. The manifestation of Jnana and Bhakti in one and the same person is as unique an occurrence as the phenomenon referred to above.

Or, he proclaims that: 'Nothing is problematical to the Incarnation. He solves the most difficult and intricate problems of life as the simplest things in the world, and his expositions are such as even a child can follow'—recalling Sathya Sai Baba's claim to "condense" the vast mass of Vedāntic teachings into a "simple message" and perhaps prefiguring a further claim that, as avatar, he 'can solve any problem, however knotty' [(19-6-1974) S12 38:228].

But there is a major difference in emphasis between his statements and those of Ramakrishna—Sathya Sai Baba's avatar identity is foregrounded, Ramakrishna's, as noted above, is "secret". Moreover, as Parrinder (1970:230-231) writes, for Ramakrishna: 'An Avatara is a human messenger of God'—this, Parrinder says, 'is not the Avatar of the Epics or Purāṇas', in which 'Avatars are divine and not human'; rather: 'It is a modern Hindu belief that the Avatars are outstanding human beings, or manifestations of God in them'. Sathya Sai Baba, on the other hand, as in the first of his statements quoted above, often proclaims: 'I am God'.

We may note in this regard what Choudhary (1981:63) sees as Ramakrishna's influence upon 'an independent branch of the Brāhmo Samāj known as 'The Brāhmo-Samāj of India...', which was set up by one Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884), initially with strong overt Christian content, but gradually becoming 'hinduised' and aligned with Ramakrishna³². Keshab, in parallel to Ramakrishna, pro-

simile of a deity as a ferry to "the other shore"—which, as noted earlier (p.147)—goes back even to vedic times, and the theme of the supremacy of the (full) avatar is in keeping with what we encountered in the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*'s attitude to Kṛṣṇa. It is thus possible that this parallel between Sathya Sai Baba and Ramakrishna's similes is coincidental, but it is noteworthy that the distinction between differing grades of spiritual attainments (in Sathya Sai Baba's version) does recall similar distinctions that Ramakrishna often made (see, e.g., Ramakrishna (1965), pp.219-221).

³² Cf. Halbfass (1988:225-227), who sees Ramakrishna as having little real influence in this regard,

moted the idea of ‘God in history speaking through ‘Greatmen’, regarding himself as one of the greatmen sent by God on a special mission, and, therefore, to be honoured’. The avatar, here in the guise of the “greatman”, is indeed not such an uncommon occurrence as that portrayed in the epics—Ramakrishna speaks of ‘innumerable ...Ramas, Krishnas, Buddhas, Christs, etc. Out of these, one or two now and then come down into this world and produce mighty changes and revolutions’³³—but, for him at least, this is still some sort of divine “descent”, and these figures are coordinated (with little subordination).

In contrast, when we come to the ideas of Vivekananda, as Beckerlegge (2004: 152) writes: “Christ and Buddha were names of states to be attained’... but ‘the names do not make much difference’”—this, as indicated earlier, is very much transcendent inclusivism—(mainstream, exoteric) Christian and Buddhist understandings of these figures are all but obliterated³⁴. To give an extreme example of this, I would quote Sarkar’s (1997:348) portrayal of Vivekananda’s forays into fostering ‘Hindu’ identity and pride—which even went to the extent of promoting ‘the conquest of the whole world by the Hindu race ...[a] conquest of religion and spirituality’. And elsewhere, Vivekananda makes it clear that he envisaged this conquest as proceeding firmly along advaitic lines—Richards (1998:217) cites him as proclaiming: ‘Would to God that the whole world were Advaitists tomorrow...’³⁵. Whilst Sathya Sai Baba certainly does not push “Hindu” as a racial identity, he does, of course, much push *advaita*, and we will see in the next section that his own designs on world domination, beyond simply echoing Vivekananda’s (or later, “New Age”) views, accord with this orientation.

but nonetheless acknowledges a convergence of the views of Keshab with those of Ramakrishna.

³³ Ramakrishna (1965) 215-216

³⁴ NB It is perhaps significant to note here what Hacker (1995:95) sees as a ‘lack of concern about terminology’ (for the divine) in Śaṅkara’s *advaita* [by which Vivekananda was certainly influenced].

³⁵ NB That this is transcendent inclusivism is highlighted as Vivekananda goes on to say ‘let us take the ignorant by the hand, lead them always step by step just as they can go, and know that every step in all religious growth in India has been progressive’.

5.2 Nationalism & Traditionalism

There is no culture greater than the culture of Bharat [India]. This culture is eternal, universal and acceptable to everyone. ...The epithet Bharatiya [Indian] does not mean a person born in the land of Bharat. Whoever follows the culture of Bharat is a Bharatiya.¹

Babb (1986:172) identifies in Sathya Sai Baba's teachings a 'persistent note of cultural nationalism', and the passage here exemplifies this—also recalling the ideas of Vivekananda cited at the end of the previous section. That Sathya Sai Baba's "nationalism" (if it can be called that) is culturally rather than (primarily) geographically defined is clear from the fact that he seems to subscribe to



Fig.25 Sathya Sai Baba in 2004 with (then Prime Minister of India) Atal Behari Vajpayee.

the theories of B.G.Tilak (1880-1920)—who believed the Vedas to have originated in the Arctic region (based upon his interpretation of astronomical references)². Whilst Tilak was himself a staunch Hindu Nationalist³, his theories in this regard have become a bane to recent Hindu Nationalist scholars—who seem to feel a need to portray "Mother India" as the geographical origin of all things Indian⁴. Thus—despite a prominent alignment with some contemporary Hindu Nationalist leaders (like A.B.Vajpayee, Fig.25)—Sathya Sai Baba is far from being a typical "Hindu Nationalist".

Hugh Urban (2003a:87ff.) writes that:

Sai Baba is an outspoken and ardent champion of Indian—and specifically Hindu—nationalism. His spiritual message is almost always and everywhere tied to very clear political and cultural concerns.

But one of the major sources upon which he bases this assertion—sometime hagiographer of Sathya Sai Baba S.D.Kulkarni⁵—is independently well known (outside of Sathya Sai Baba circles) for his strong Hindu Nationalist views⁶. Urban misleadingly presents Kulkarni's views as if they were Sathya Sai Baba's own. Sathya Sai Baba, for his part, relates an amusing anecdote that testifies to his lack of sympathy with what has been one major concern of recent Hindu Nationalists:

¹ (21-3-1999) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume32/sss32p1-04.pdf> [29-3-2007]

² Sathya Sai Baba (5-11-1991) S24 26:289; Tilak (1903)—cf. N.R.Warapande (1993).

³ NB It has been suggested that Tilak set out to promote nationalist pride by showing a great antiquity for the Vedas through (misleading) astronomical calculations—see S. Wolpert (1962), p.64.

⁴ E.g., S. Talageri (1993).

⁵ NB Urban also repeatedly misspells 'Kulkarni' as 'Kalkarni', and once miscites Babb as 'Sai Baba'.

⁶ He is, for example, author of a book titled: *The story of Hindu Supremacy* (Bombay, 1992).

Once Ashok Singhal, General Secretary of Vishwa Hindu Parishad [“World Hindu Council”—the most powerful Hindu Nationalist group], came to Me with the plea, “Kindly let us know the birthplace of Rama so that we can construct a temple there.” I replied, “The true birthplace of Rama is the womb of Kausalya.” Mother’s womb is the birthplace of one and all, be it a commoner or the Avatar Himself.⁷

Whilst, as Urban shows from other sources (although, again, predominantly secondary sources—writings of Kasturi and Gokak), and as we will see below, there are some definite compatibilities between Sathya Sai Baba’s views and those of (more politically oriented) Hindu Nationalists, in my experience, the likes of Singhal, Vajpayee and Kulkarni are not typical of Sathya Sai Baba’s followers.



Fig.26 Sai-entific (cf. p.383) World-Saviour—an artistically inclined Sathya Sai Baba devotee associates Sathya Sai Baba more with global and scientific ideals than with Hindu Nationalism.

Fig.26 recalls Srinivas’ “global” phase of Sathya Sai Baba’s persona (see Section 2.3), and Sathya Sai Baba himself as sometimes directly encourages such views:

In a very short time, all the people of the world will be united. Today you consider America, Russia, Japan, China, Pakistan, India as separate from each other. Very

⁷ (19-11-1999) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume33/sss33-08.pdf> [16-2-2006] NB One of the most protracted (and violent) disagreements between Hindu Nationalists and Indian Muslims has been over a mosque that the former of these groups have claimed to be built on the site of the birth place of the avatar Rāma—wanting to demolish this mosque in favour of a Hindu temple to be constructed in the same spot (there was, they say, originally a Hindu temple there, but this was supposedly torn down by early Muslim invaders).

soon there will be unity amongst all these countries.⁸

Thus, in whatever ways the views of Sathya Sai Baba (and Vivekananda) are taken by their followers⁹ (and Vivekananda too has been adopted as a figurehead by recent extreme Hindu Nationalists¹⁰), it sometimes seems as if nationalism were simply one more creed to be absorbed and obliterated by the ethic of transcendent inclusivism that we have seen to be a common theme of their teachings. In this understanding, as we saw Sathya Sai Baba put it at the head of this section, Indian ‘culture is eternal, universal and acceptable to everyone’. Indeed, he elsewhere says: ‘There is nothing like the American truth, the Pakistani truth, the Italian truth, the Chinese truth and the Indian truth. Truth is only one and Truth is God’.¹¹ Such *advaita* leanings, I would suggest, far more than a vision of a “new world order”¹², are behind Sathya Sai Baba’s globalizing claims.

Oddly, Beckerlegge (2004:154-156) suggests that Vivekananda (partly) developed his ‘inclusivist’ understanding through ‘his acquaintance [from his ‘European-style education’] with the popular application of Darwin’s theory of evolution to social developments’:

Religions, still seen as paths leading individuals of different temperaments to the same goal, although at different rates, are themselves seen to be at various stages of development, with certain strands within them displaying higher levels of spiritual insight. Vivekananda’s theory, therefore, anticipates a convergence between those elements of different religions at the highest level, revealing the previously hidden ‘universal religion’. Vivekananda believed that this was to be seen most fully in the Advaita Vedanta tradition of Hinduism.

In light of what we have seen, I would suggest that any influence of Darwinism on ‘Vivekananda’s theory’ was superficial. Vivekananda was more likely making a “connection” (through “resemblance” in the traditional manner described earlier) between this theory and the *advaita* ideas that we encountered in Section 4.4 above. This can be seen as an appeal to rational authority (that inherent in Dar-

⁸ (1-1-2000) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume33/sss33-01.pdf> [3-5-2007]

⁹ NB Palmer (2005:106) notes of Sathya Sai Baba that his ‘reappropriating and reenergizing Indian/Hindu culture and traditions’ means that ‘Hindu Nationalists often count him as one of their own. They also count on him to energize sympathetic voters and deliver them to the polls’.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Tapan Raychaudhuri (1998), pp.1ff.

¹¹ <http://www.sssbpt.info/summershowers/ss1993/ss1993-01.pdf> [26-5-2007]

¹² NB Hugh Urban (2003b:254) see similar sentiments to those expressed in the previous passage that I cited from Sathya Sai Baba as (in the case of Rajneesh/Osho) exemplifying ‘*the Spiritual Logic of Late Capitalism*’. Many “New Age” groups (on the like of which see p.332) aspire to bring about global unity, but—whilst Sathya Sai Baba certainly does (also) echo such views—the last passage here shows his *advaita* ideals of “oneness” to be behind some of this.

winism as a “scientific” theory) in support for his revival of advaitic transcendent inclusivism—it is, as Halbfass (1988:220) puts it, ‘an afterthought’.

In this last regard, I would cite what Halbfass (1988:219-220) notes to be, for Hacker, the main distinction between Neo-Hinduism and traditionalism—not ‘any particular teachings’, but, rather:

the different ways in which they appeal to the tradition, the structures which they employ to interrelate the indigenous and the foreign, and the degree of their receptivity vis-à-vis the West. ...“Neo-Hinduism . . . always implies reinterpretation.” ...[Neo-Hindus] first adopt Western values and means of orientation and then attempt to find the foreign in the indigenous: “. . . afterwards they connect these values with and claim them as part of the Hindu tradition”.

Thus, Vivekananda, as an exemplary Neo-Hindu, finds the foreign (Darwinian theory) in the traditional (Advaita-based transcendent inclusivism)—which he then reinterprets in this light. Sri Aurobindo (who we will encounter especially in the next section) similarly exemplifies this ethic—Sheth (2002:117,n13) describes his reinterpretation of traditional groupings of the avatars as follows:

Aurobindo ...sees in this arrangement a “parable of evolution”—from the Fish to the half-animal, half-human Man-Lion, from the human Dwarf form to the more developed human forms, and then progressing to the more spiritually advanced forms of Kṛṣṇa, Buddha, and Kalkin.

Aurobindo, like Vivekananda, “sees evolution” in a reinterpretation of a traditional theory (in this case that of the ten avatars—see p.217 above)¹³.

So far as I am aware, Sathya Sai Baba makes no reference to this last interpretation of the avatars, but another case of Neo-Hindu reinterpretation closely parallels Sathya Sai Baba’s own portrayal of the avatar in terms of modern theories of evolution (p.127 above)—Killingley (1999:151) cites Vivekananda as proclaiming:

Whenever there is life, the storehouse of infinite energy is behind it. Starting as some fungus, some very minute, microscopic bubble, and all the time drawing from that infinite store house of energy, a form is changed slowly and steadily until in course of time it becomes a plant, then an animal, then man, ultimately God.

¹³ Cf., however, Whaling (1987:150)—who writes of Aurobindo’s use of traditional sources: ‘It is true that he reinterpreted them in the light of the contemporary situation—nevertheless Kees Bolle [Bolle (1965)] has shown how the insights of Aurobindo are in continuity with the long history of the Hindu tradition... assimilating new insights—in this case the insights of the modern West—into the ongoing Hindu tradition’. Whaling (1987:168) concludes that ‘the Hindu adaptation to change and innovation since 1945 is a continuation, in slightly more dramatic terms, of the Hindu adaptation to change and innovation over the last two thousand five hundred years’, and there is something to be said for this viewpoint—but, as we have just seen, a distinction between “traditionalism” and “Neo-Hinduism” can, and has, been made, and, as Halbfass (1988:221) puts it, this distinction, though a ‘simplification’, can be ‘a useful and convenient one’.

Vivekananda, as Killingley (1999:152-153) goes on to note, based such understandings upon a (mis)reading of certain passages in the *Yoga-Sūtra*, and was ‘glad to claim evolution as an ancient Indian idea’; there is “reinterpretation” (of the *Yoga-Sūtra*) here, and Vivekananda is again “finding the foreign in the traditional”.

But Sathya Sai Baba’s co-opting of evolutionary theory in dramatizing his avatar teachings, despite its close parallel in form to that of Vivekananda (and perhaps even some direct influence upon him in this regard), for the most part exemplifies a spirit that contrasts with that of both Vivekananda and Aurobindo’s interpretations—he finds the antecedents of the avatar (the indigenous) in a foreign cosmogony. He gives no indication that he views his evolutionary account as being a traditional one—he makes no reference to the *Yoga-Sūtra*. A similar case is his (and Ramakrishna’s) “steamer” metaphor (cited near the end of the previous section)—the avatar is seen in a product of foreign technology; the foreign technology is not emphasized as being a part of Hinduism. Such views, despite their “modern” content, must be classified as traditionalist.

To give another example of his traditionalist ethic, Sathya Sai Baba finds an analogy to the avatar idea in modern atomic and molecular theories:

Scientists announce that the Cosmos is composed of atoms. Spiritual seers announce that God is the minutest of atoms and the vastest among the vast. Sea water yields salt crystals. Similarly, the all-pervading Divinity crystallises as *Avathaars* (incarnations). The crystal is the build-up of many atoms; the *Avathaar* principle is the build up of many divine attributes. The two sciences---physical and spiritual---can never clash; one complements the other [(23-11-1982) S15 56:317].

His last point here is one that Srinivas (2001:300ff.) notes to be a major rallying point of the Sathya Sai Organisation. She does not specifically link this purpose back to Sathya Sai Baba himself—focussing her discussion upon the indeed not inconsiderable efforts of some of his (scientifically educated) devotees in this direction¹⁴, but, as this example indicates, such efforts have definite seeds in Sathya Sai Baba’s own ideas (albeit that his followers variously take Neo-Hindu or traditionalist approaches to their material¹⁵). Despite his cosmopolitan following and modern repertoire, Sathya Sai Baba, by Hacker’s definition, is a traditionalist.

To give one final example, I would note that even in elucidating his personal mythology (itself novel—at least in its application to him), he finds the indigenous

¹⁴ Cf. Bowen (1985), p.187.

¹⁵ Anon. (1998:578-579) exemplifies a Neo-Hindu ethic, beginning with quantum electrodynamics and reinterpreting Vedanta (and/or quantum theory) to show the compatibility of the two. Charanjit Ghooi (1990:74ff.) exemplifies traditionalism, finding Ayurvedic ideas in modern anatomy.

in foreign forms. ‘Comparing this creation to a big factory’, he says:

the different gods are like the directors, managers and supervisors. Workers of this factory are akin to human beings. All of them have definite duties to perform according to the position they occupy. Thus one of the duties of Vishnu is to visit (incarnate) the factory ten times (dasha avataras) in four yugas.... This Sai is the owner of this factory. I do not have a time schedule to adhere to nor can any law bind me.... I am SAKALA DEVATA SWAROOPA, for when I the owner visit the factory, all the directors, managers and supervisors too accompany.¹⁶

Here, of course, we revisit his presentation of himself as a conglomerate of all forms of divinity (see p.119 above), and he finds this, along with the traditional doctrines of ten avatars and four *yugas*, in a modern factory setting. This, and all of the above-cited passages, invoke the rational authority believed to be inherent in modern (and/or Western) structures, ideas and persons, in support of Sathya Sai Baba’s ideas, whereas, for Vivekananda at least, the point was not that evolutionary theory legitimated the *Yoga-Sūtra* (indeed, he goes on to proclaim the superiority of the *Yoga-Sūtra*’s version of “evolution”), but—in the terms that we saw him using earlier—that it was *already contained in* this work. For Vivekananda, what is most important is that there is no need to look outside of Hinduism for modern ideas. For Sathya Sai Baba, the main point is that such ideas support the validity of traditional (and his own idiosyncratic) spiritual views.

Beckerlegge (2004:139) characterizes ‘Neo-Hinduism’ as follows¹⁷:

- 1 its concern with the relationship between religion and nationalism;
- 2 the exposure of many of its major thinkers to western ideas, education and Christianity;
- 3 ambivalence about the traditional use of images in religious worship or outright rejection of this practice;
- 4 placing greater reliance upon individual judgement, rather than the acceptance of traditional authorities, including dependence upon scriptures other than the Veda in the justification of personal belief and practice;
- 5 the novel reinterpretation of traditional Hindu concepts, such as *dharma* and yoga, and of philosophical systems, such as Advaita Vedanta...;
- 6 commitment to practical service to humanity.

And, whilst most of this could be seen to apply to Sathya Sai Baba, this is only so—as I will further argue—in a largely misleading sense.

I cited earlier Babb’s identification in Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings of a ‘persistent

¹⁶ SVAND 142

¹⁷ Cf. Hacker (1995), pp.251-252.

note of cultural nationalism’, but I did not note that Babb goes on to describe this as being ‘of a kind that sometimes verges on nativism’. And, whilst we have seen that Sathya Sai Baba does not place much stock in “India” or “Indian” as geographically based identities, he *does* (in line with Urban’s above cited suggestions) sometimes do this. It is clear, however, that his “nativist” views derive more strongly from traditional Hindu ideals than from any Neo-Hindu conceptions of “nationalism” imported from Europe. Matchett (2001:82) writes that, of the various traditional geographic regions described in *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa* 2:3, there is:

one region in which human values and aspirations have a special place: Bhāratavarṣa [a name that is now often used synonymously with India¹⁸]. ...it differs from the other *varṣas* [regions] in the following respects: the succession of the four *yugas* takes place within it (v.19); the religious exercises of asceticism, sacrifice and giving are practised there (v.20); it is a land where merit can be acquired through works (v.22); it is through life in Bhārata that heaven or liberation can be won. ...[It is] opposed to the *bhogabhūmayah* of the other *varṣas*....

And it is this type of understanding that seems to be behind some of (what might otherwise be interpreted to be) Sathya Sai Baba’s “nationalist” proclamations. Thus he laments that:

The *Bhaarithabhūmi* (land of Bhaarith) which is inherently *Yogabhūmi* and *Thyāgabhūmi* (land of godliness and sacrifice) is being dragged along the tracks of other *Bhogabhūmis* (lands of enjoyment), and putting on the paraphernalia of worldly happiness. This is the path of ignorance, of hatred, of greed, of wickedness, and competition [(17-12-1964) S4 49:282].

In further echoes of the above, he also insists that: ‘the *Avathār* has to take shape in the place where the *Dharma* originated and where it is still studied and valued’¹⁹; ‘Only in India are Avatars born, because only in India are the Sastras understood; and only in India do the sages constantly experiment and practice’²⁰.

The other items on Beckerlegge’s checklist simply do not fit Sathya Sai Baba, or are similarly misleading. We may recall that Sathya Sai Baba’s English education was minimal—extending little beyond primary level. We have seen that he clearly

¹⁸ NB ‘Bharat’, exemplified in Sathya Sai Baba’s use at the head of this section, is more commonly encountered form in his teachings (as it is, of course, in modern Indian usage in general).

¹⁹ (5-10-1962) S2 44:250

²⁰ C (1968-78) XLIV 121 Elsewhere, he emphasizes this with a modern metaphor: ‘In India, there is a rich mine of spirituality and so engineers have to come here to operate it, extract it and prepare it for use. That is the reason why more manifestations of the Lord appear here’ (3-9-1958) <http://sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume01/ssso1-15.pdf> [6-3-2007]. NB This is an obverse to views expressed on Adigalar (on whom see pp.356ff below)—believed to be an incarnation of the Goddess: ‘She has appeared in India many times and has taught us many things. That is why India was and is the fountain of knowledge’ (<http://www.omsakthi.org/writings/avatar3.html> [20-2-2007]).

has been exposed to Christian religious forms, but has hardly taken upon himself the orthodox sense of these—he certainly does not condemn image-worship outright, tending to see it (in classic *advaita* fashion) as a preliminary, but still acceptable, spiritual practice²¹. We have also seen that he regards the Vedas as authoritative, and that he does give novel interpretations to traditional Hindu concepts, but not usually in order to bring them into line with modern Western thinking—he specializes more in charismatic reversals, making changes in support of his *advaita* views or of his persona. He does place some emphasis upon individual judgement²²—but he also speaks highly of “blind faith” and “implicit faith”—over and above “the evidence of one’s eyes”²³.

The only one of Beckerlegge’s categories that unambiguously fits Sathya Sai Baba is the last one: ‘commitment to practical service to humanity’; he says:

Serve others for they are the reflections of the same entity of which you are yourself another reflection. No one of you has any authenticity, except with reference to the One Original [(25-2-1964) S4 12:70-71].

But this, I would yet again suggest, he has simply adopted on the (traditional) authority of the likes of Vivekananda. Numbers 5 and 6 on Beckerlegge’s list are to some extent interrelated—Beckerlegge (2004:156) writes that Vivekananda:

reinterpreted... [the Advaita Vedānta] affirmation of the identity of being to draw from it an ethical imperative, namely, that to serve another is in reality to serve one’s ‘self’ because the same ultimate reality pervades and unites all beings.²⁴

Hacker (1978:594-595) suggests that Vivekananda was likely influenced by the ‘voluntaristic’ monism of Schopenhauer—via his ‘posthumous disciple’ Paul Deussen—and, while this is itself a controversial and problematic claim²⁵, there can be no doubt that Vivekananda, did have some modern (or at least Western) influences, and did reinterpret traditional *advaita* viewpoints. I will have more to say about the issue of “social service” shortly, but will note for now that the fact that views akin to Vivekananda’s find their way into the teachings of Sathya Sai Baba cannot be seen as evidence that Sathya Sai Baba is similarly “reinterpreting” *advaita* ideas in order to bring them into line with modern needs. He may simply

²¹ NB His views also parallel those of Ramakrishna in this regard (e.g. Ramakrishna 1965:112-114).

²² See, e.g.: C XLVI 126 (in praise of ‘common sense’); MBI 204 (on ‘conscience’); (4-7-1968) S8 22:114-115 (on ‘reasoning’, ‘analysis’, and ‘synthesis’).

²³ E.g. (8-1953) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume01/sss01-01.pdf> [12-7-2007]

²⁴ On Vivekananda’s views in this regard, see also Sarkar (1997), p.347; Beckerlegge (1998). On Vivekananda’s “reinterpretation” of “Hindusim” more generally, see Chowdhury-Sengupta (1998).

²⁵ NB On this see, also: Killingley (1998), pp.145-149; Hacker (1995), pp.273ff.

have adopted them “wholesale” (as we will see that he certainly has done in at least one prominent case) from Vivekananda, *as if they were traditional ideas*. Thus, I would conclude, any strong characterization of Sathya Sai Baba as exemplifying “Neo-Hinduism” (or the “Hindu-Renaissance”—as Bharati would have it) is superficial. He has adopted some Neo-Hindu views—but he mostly uses modernity (as we saw Bowen put it) as “a medium of expression” for his (often innovative, but not fundamentally modern) spiritual and personal agendas. He almost invariably seeks to find the traditional in the foreign, rather than vice versa, thus, in the sense defined by Hacker at least, we may class him as a traditionalist.

This is borne out by some examples in which Sathya Sai Baba assimilates the ideal of social service into his avatar theology. He describes both himself and the traditional avatars as exemplars of social service and even declares this to be the very reason ‘why *Avathaars* happen’²⁶. Interestingly, and in a similar fashion, he also assimilates a statement of Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948) into his avatar persona, declaring: ‘I have often told you that My Life is My Message. *Avathaars* proclaim so and demonstrate their Divinity that way’²⁷. This statement, ‘My life is My Message’, has become one of the most popular catch-phrases of his mission, but it is likely that many of his followers are unaware of the fact that he adopted it from Gandhi²⁸. If, as Oscar Wilde famously put it: ‘Talent borrows. Genius steals’, then we might—on this count at least—categorize Sathya Sai Baba as a genius! But, of course, if we recall what we have seen of the traditional Hindu religious works that we have encountered, such “stealing” is the rule, rather than the exception. Here, Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar identity simply becomes a focus for this.

This identity is also the focus for the one of the most striking examples of his adopting the views of a modern Hindu religious leader—one to which I have already alluded several times. This comes as he begins his self-titled book *Sathya Sai Vahini* with an entire page closely paraphrased from the writings of Vivekananda—without any acknowledgement of this fact whatsoever—Vivekananda’s ideas are simply presented as Sathya Sai Baba’s own:

Though Gurus of the common type have increased in numbers, there is available for man, a Guru far more supreme and far more compassionate than any or all of them. He is no other than the Avatar of the Lord. He can, by the mere expression of His

²⁶ Sathya Sai Baba (6-3-1977) S13 29:196

²⁷ Sathya Sai Baba (11-1970) S10 36:243

²⁸ Alexandra Nagel (<http://www.saiguru.net/english/articles/o2shivashakti.htm> [19-02-2006])—citing Eknath Easwaran, *Gandhi, the Man* (Tomaes, California: Nilgiri Press, 1997, p.140).

Will confer on man the highest consummation of spiritual life. He can gift it and get man to accept it. Even the meanest of the mean can acquire the highest wisdom, in a trice. He is the Guru of all Gurus. He is the fullest embodiment of God as man. Men can cognise God only in the human form. The Bharathiya Spiritual Stream has been declaring, over and over again, that adoring God in the human form is the highest duty of man. Unless God incarnates as man, man can never hope to see God or listen to His Voice. Of course, man may picture God in various other forms, but he can never approximate to the genuine form of God. However much one may try, man cannot picture God in any form except the human. People can pour out wonderful discourses and talks on God and the nature and composition of all that exists in the Universe. They may satisfy themselves, asserting that all accounts of God descending in human form are meaningless myths. That is what the poor ordinary eye can discern. This strange inference is not based on Jnana [wisdom]. As a matter of fact, Jnana is absent in these assertions and declarations. What we can notice in them is only the froth floating on ego waves [SSV 98 (cf. VV 27-29)].

Sathya Sai Baba's version has of course been translated into English from his native Telugu—but it clearly parallels a passage written by Vivekananda in English:

Such great teachers of spiritual truth are indeed very few in number in this world, but the world is never altogether without them.... Higher and nobler than all ordinary ones are another set of teachers, the Avatāras of Ishvara [the Lord], in the world. They can transmit spirituality with a touch, even with a mere wish. The lowest and the most degraded characters become in one second saints at their command. They are the Teachers of all teachers, the highest manifestations of God through man. We cannot see God except through them. We cannot help worshipping them; and indeed they are the only ones whom we are bound to worship. No man can really see God except through these human manifestations. If we try to see God otherwise, we make for ourselves a hideous caricature of Him and believe the caricature to be no worse than the original... Talk as you may, try as you may, you cannot think of God except as a man. You may deliver great intellectual discourses on God and on all things under the sun, become great rationalists and prove to your satisfaction that all these accounts of the Avatāras of God as man are nonsense. But let us come for a moment to practical common sense. What is there behind this kind of remarkable intellect? Zero, nothing, simply so much froth.²⁹

Vivekananda is, at the beginning of this passage, presumably drawing upon his famous “conversion” experience at the hands of Ramakrishna—who is said to have given him the realization that ‘everything was God’ by a mere touch on the head³⁰. But this context is absent from Sathya Sai Baba's version; in fact, Sathya Sai Baba elsewhere declares that he, as avatar, does not transform people in this way—even giving the case of Vivekananda as an example of what he claims to be the merely

²⁹ Vivekananda (nd), Vol.3, p.56.

³⁰ Isherwood (1965), p.206.

temporary nature of such experiences³¹. Sathya Sai Baba has very much made this passage his own—much as the epics do with the traditions from which they are fashioned, or as *advaitins* see every tradition as indicating the “truth” of *advaita*.

Interestingly, Sathya Sai Baba is not alone in borrowing (parts of) this passage from Vivekananda. Writings on Adigalar also evidently draw upon this—again without acknowledgement:

An Avatar can transmit spirituality with a touch or even a mere wish. By his look, wish, or touch, people are saved. The lowest and most degraded characters become saints at the command of the Avatar.³²

The works of Vivekananda have evidently very much become a part of the fabric out of which modern Hindu figures weave their theologies. I would reiterate here what I have noted several times above—that it is as if these works were traditional scriptures, and I would add that there is a sense in which many of them (certainly not all) *are* quite in accordance with traditional thinking (we saw something of this earlier, when I compared an instance of Vivekananda’s inclusivism to traditional *advaita*). We may thus, again, conclude that, despite (or indeed because of the manner in which he appropriates) his modern influences—and, as just suggested, due to the fact that some of these modern views themselves accord with tradition—Sathya Sai Baba should be classed as a traditionalist rather than as a Neo-Hindu. But, of course, as we have seen, and will continue to see hereunder, some of Sathya Sai Baba’s influences are distinctively modern *in appearance*, and can thus be labelled as *modern influences*. A consideration of them thus does give us an understanding of the forms that several significant elements of his avatar persona have come to take, and, further to what I have thus far done, in the next section, I will focus especially upon the effects that modern Western (and Westernized Hindu) appropriations of traditional “Hinduism” have had upon this persona.

³¹ C XXIX 79 NB The phenomenon in question here is traditionally and popularly referred to “*śakti-pāt*”—see, e.g.: White (1974); Lola Williamson (2005), pp.15off.

³² <http://www.omsakthi.org/writings/avatar3.html> [20-2-2007]

5.3 Stars in the East

Like the hotel-keeper who goes to a druggist for a pill when he gets a headache, while that same druggist goes to the same hotel for a cup of coffee when he gets a headache, the West comes to the East for mental peace and the East is enamoured of the West for what it considers necessary for mental peace!¹

If, in the first two sections of this chapter, we have seen something of the influence of Western ideas upon Hinduism, we will see here that Hinduism has also considerably influenced some Western individuals and groups, and that this in turn has reimpacted upon Hindu ideas. Bharati (1981a:273-274) calls this process of ‘re-enculturation’ the “pizza-effect”—after the ‘new tastes’ acquired by the pizza (originally a simple baked bread with no trimmings) in America, which contributed to a ‘new status’ for it upon its return to Italy with Italian-Americans. He sees the beginnings of this “effect” in India with the emulation by Indian scholars of the early European Indologists, but notes many less direct influences also.

Milton Singer (1972:24-26) outlines (and prior to that briefly backgrounds) an ‘Oriental renaissance’—beginning in the 19th century, as: ‘Writers, poets, and philosophers [in Europe and America] found inspiration in the Oriental classics and modelled some of their work on the new forms’. Out of this movement, as Singer (1972:27) goes on to note, arose ‘the modern image of India as a land of surpassing spirituality, an image that also implies the contrast with Western “materialism.”’ It is this image to which Sathya Sai Baba refers above—he prefaces this passage by contrasting ‘secular’ and ‘spiritual’ studies—urging the traditional ‘*Pandiths*’ (“scholars”) to adhere to the latter. Reading the above metaphor closely, it is clear where Sathya Sai Baba’s sympathies lie: ‘the West’ is like coffee for a headache—at best an indirect cure, and something merely “considered necessary” for mental peace, rather than intrinsically productive of the same, whereas ‘the East’ is like a pill which directly targets a headache, producing genuine ‘mental peace’². In accordance with this, Sathya Sai Baba sometimes decries Indian nationals who seek lucrative employment overseas³, and praises Westerners who: ‘have come here with 20, 000 rupees, yet ...sleep on the floor. They have no pos-

¹ Sathya Sai Baba (23-11-1962) S2 48:270

² Not that Sathya Sai Baba thinks highly of modern medicine—he sees it as involving unwarranted side-effects {(6-2-1993) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume26/sss26-04.pdf> [7-3-2007]} and a high likelihood of relapse—he praises, rather, the achievements of traditional Ayurvedic practitioners [(21-5-1991) S24 8:84], and claims to merely pretend to take any pill foisted upon him by doctors trained in Western medicine: ‘actually I throw it away and sip only water’ [San (3-1994) 69].

³ E.g.: Sathya Sai Baba (25-5-1982) S15 44:243-244

sessions. They want only God'; 'They are true sons and daughters of India'⁴. This, then, is the "pizza effect"—the "true children of India" are foreign imports.

The foundations of the "Oriental Renaissance" were laid by various European scholars (and scholarly administrators of the British Raj) who, from the late eighteenth century onwards, studied and translated many Indian religious works. And this had a considerable impact upon Hinduism—Halbfass (1988:259) writes that:

The work of Max Müller and other Western Indologists and historians of ancient India generally became a point of contact for conservative Hindus, and the European interest in the most ancient Indian past became for them a factor of self-affirmation and apologetics, which could also be utilized as an argument against modernization and Westernization.

In keeping with this, Sathya Sai Baba cites one such Western Indologist, H.H.Wilson (1786-1860), as a validator of his claim to religious leadership: 'As Wilson translated the *Padma Purana*, he came across a reference of a visionary, 5'4 in height⁵, manifesting himself in *Parthi* [i.e. Puttaparthi]'⁶. Sathya Sai Baba draws rational authority from this modern Western "point of contact for conservative Hindus", in combination with the traditional authority that the *Padma-Purāṇa* itself commands. Indeed, the immediate textual context of his claim here has him singing the praises of Indian culture as viewed through the eyes of some of the early Western Indologists (namely Friedrich Max Müller and Ralph Griffith).

But, importantly, despite such Indological foundations, the Oriental Renaissance was (/is) more than a mere literary phenomenon—Singer (1972:28) observes that:

From the latter half of the nineteenth century to the present, the pilgrimage to the wise men of the East became a popular reason for a trip to India or Ceylon. Europeans and Americans sat at the feet of sages and holy men and recorded their conversations, modes of life, and unusual powers.

Given this new found source of charismatic religious leadership, and centuries of unfulfilled longing amongst Christians for the promised return of Jesus, it is unsurprising that some felt that they had seen his 'star in the East'⁷, and this, as we will see, contributed to a sense that the arrival of "*the Avatar*" was immanent.

⁴ GC 55-56

⁵ NB Sathya Sai Baba is unusually short in stature, but there is numerology at work here also ($5 + 4 = 9$ —a sacred number).

⁶ Sathya Sai Baba (17-6-1996) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/pv960617.html> [13-4-2007] NB Sathya Sai Baba's claim itself is ultimately unfalsifiable—he does not mention whether or not Wilson recorded this observation. But Wilson's sole published work on the *Padma Purāṇa*—a lengthy and detailed summary of its contents—certainly contains no such reference.

⁷ This, in the Bible (*Matthew* 2:2), was the sign by which three (Eastern) 'wise men' are said to have become aware of the immanent birth of Jesus.

As Singer (1972:29) describes it:

One of the earliest and best-organized movements in the West to popularize “Eastern Wisdom” was the Theosophical Society, founded about 1875 by Madame Blavatsky, a Russian lady, and Colonel Olcott, an American, and later directed in India by Annie Besant [1847-1933], a British reformer. ...The Theosophical doctrines were drawn chiefly from Hinduism and Buddhism combined with admixtures of nineteenth-century spiritualism, occultism, and humanitarianism. The movement attracted wide attention and followers in India... Europe and the United States.

Singer goes on to state that the ‘new pride and interest in Hinduism’ that the Theosophical Society stimulated contributed in no small way to the “Hindu Renaissance” that we discussed in the previous section. As Choudhary (1981:74) writes, the Theosophical Society sought ‘to promote the idea of fellow feeling and brotherhood amongst men of all nations and religions... to encourage the study of comparative religion, especially that of oriental religions’. Halbfass (1988:399) notes that ‘the founders of the Theosophical Society ...sought to affiliate their movement with the Ārya Samāj’, but that (unsurprisingly, in light of the contrast that we might note between the ideal just described and those of the Ārya Samāj that we saw above): ‘These attempts did not have lasting success’. Indeed, whilst, as we saw Parrinder note, the Ārya Samāj denied the possibility of avatars, Choudhary (1981:75) writes that, amongst the Theosophical Society leaders, ‘Annie Besant... had a special fascination for the Avatāra and the Gītā’⁸.

This fascination influenced many Theosophical Society members, and was carried on by some subsequent Theosophy-influenced authors (especially Alice Bailey, see below). It is thus no accident that in the mid sixties, an Australian Theosophist, Howard Murphet, sought out Sathya Sai Baba and soon became one of the most prolific writers of English language works on him (see Aitken (2004:181-184), and p.410 below)—including the unambiguously titled: *Sai Baba: Avatar*, which has no doubt shaped the views of many of Sathya Sai Baba’s devotees (Indian and Western). Another major Western proponent of Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings, John S. Hislop, also had strong Theosophical influences, even ‘living for two years (in America) with mr. [sic] J. Krishnamurti and Dr. Annie Besant’⁹.

This roots of this fascination with the avatar idea are evident, however, even in the ideas of Blavatsky (1831-1891), the principal founder of the Theosophical Society, who—as Bassuk (1987b:109-113) writes:

⁸ Bassuk (1987b:114) notes that: ‘For the 25th anniversary of the Theosophical Society in 1899, Besant delivered four lectures on Avatars in which she interpreted this concept’ (see Besant (1899)).

⁹ First (unnumbered) page of MBI.

believed that she was guided by Masters... also known as Adepts¹⁰ ...focussed on spiritual India, mysterious Tibet, and beyond it to an even more esoteric Shambala (...the village from which the Kalki Avatar is [traditionally] expected to arrive). ...Blavatsky was heavily influenced by the Vishnu Purana, which had recently been translated into English, and [she] ...revealed a doctrine of Avatars [in which] ...all the Avatars are trees that grow from the seed (*Bija*) and its principle (*Maha Vishnu*)... all the Avatars are sons of the Father who is the 'Causal Soul'... she identifies them as Buddha, Shankara, Jesus, and a few others.

This is a type of coordinating subordinating inclusivism—the Christian concept of “God the Father”, and a traditional emanation cosmogony (the like of which we encountered in Section 3.3), are coordinated, and subordinate Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu avatar(-like) figures (who are themselves coordinated).

Christian concepts played an even stronger part in Besant's avatar views—Bassuk (1987b:114-115) writes:

For Besant, ...in the Christian nomenclature the Divine incarnation or *Avatara* is that of the second person of the Trinity [i.e. the 'Son', the 'Word' (Gk. *logos*, pl. *logoi*)¹¹].... She 'theosophized' that Vishnu and Krishna are Solar Logoi, while other Avatars are planetary Logoi... The idea of the reappearance of a Christ, an Avatar, a World Teacher, had been a common one in esoteric and Theosophical circles, but it was not until 1908 that Besant declared that preparation should be made for the coming of a new Saviour Christ....

Besant, like Blavatsky, claimed to telepathically receive her ideas from the “Masters”, but, wherever these ideas came from (the phenomenon in question here is commonly referred to as “channelling”—there are a few academic studies of this¹²), they significantly influenced some aspects of the subsequent history of the avatar idea—and, as we will see, impacted upon Sathya Sai Baba in this regard.

¹⁰ I.e. “*siddhas*”—the general sense of this accords with that described in most translations of *Yoga-Sūtra* 3:32—e.g., Purohit Swami (1938:46), a Brāhman monk, drawing upon traditional commentaries, urges the *yogi* to ‘Concentrate on the Light in the head; meet the Masters’ (*siddha-darśanam*), commenting that: ‘The Masters are the immortals. The Master instructs the pupil in the beginning through dreams, sometimes only the voice is heard... later on when the pupil is advanced, he gives his name and appears in his natural form. ... Some of the Masters who long ago entered a cave alive in the presence of thousands, are still there; they draw people to them, show them the Light’. Blavatsky was evidently acquainted with the *Yoga-Sūtra*, and herself translated 3:36 as follows: “‘The Yogi’ says Patanjali, “will hear celestial sounds, the songs and conversations of celestial choirs. He will have the perception of their touch in their passage through the air,” -- which, translated into a more sober language, means that the ascetic is enabled to see with the spiritual eye in the Astral Light, hear with the spiritual ear subjective sounds inaudible to others, and live and feel, so to say, in the Unseen Universe’ (as cited at http://www.tphtha.ws/TPH_YSPA.HTM [25-1-2007]).

¹¹ The reference here is to the Christian “Trinity”—which depicts God as simultaneously having the forms of (Heavenly) Father, Son (of God—i.e., Jesus) and Holy Spirit. Jesus is further traditionally identified as the ‘Word (of God)’ who ‘was made flesh’ (*John* 1:1,14).

¹² See, e.g.: Wayne Spencer (2001); Frederick M. Smith (2006).

Bassuk (1987b:116-117) goes on to describe how in 1909 Besant met:

a young large-eyed Indian boy... Krishna Jiddu, [better known as Krishnamurti (allegedly so called because, 'like the Avatar Krishna, he was the eighth son of his parents)], a Brahmin's son, born in 1895... His father [had] joined the Theosophical society in 1882 and decorated the walls of his home with pictures of Hindu deities including Annie Besant [a number of Theosophical luminaries achieved deity status in India]. ...Through occult knowledge, Besant predicted that Krishnamurti was to become a vehicle for the great World Teacher.... The World Teacher of the East (Lord Maitreya) informed her that he was sending his star. Krishnamurti was initiated into the Theosophical Society [after]... an astral trip to Tibet where he was led to the throne of Lord Maitreya and surrounded by the Masters... Krishnamurti answered all their questions correctly and a Silver Star flashed overhead....

The sign of the star flashing overhead (which gave its name to the 'Order of the Star in the East' which was subsequently founded with Krishnamurti as its head¹³), recalls the Christian symbolism mentioned at the beginning of this section, and—perhaps due to the weight thus placed upon this symbol as a sign of the avatar, and the fact that no such star is recorded to have appeared in conjunction with his own claim to this office—we find that Sathya Sai Baba makes a point of stating (in the context of one of his Christmas speeches) that: 'There is no rule that, when Divine Energy or Divine Incarnation descends on Earth, a star has to appear. That is the opinion of devotees only'¹⁴. This is the "charismatic" pattern that we have much encountered in his teachings: "It is believed..., but I say unto you...", and here, he uses it to directly defend his avatar status.

Bassuk (1987b:118-120) writes that:

On the fourth anniversary of Krishnamurti's initiation he announced unexpectedly that 'The Lord Buddha is here', causing great excitement and rousing high expectancy. A circle of women and girls was forming around this Krishna figure and they referred to themselves as gopis... [He] learned to play the flute like Krishna... [and was given to] singing Krishna's songs in Sanskrit.... Krishnamurti slipped into the role of World Teacher.... Besant... jubilantly announced that 'The Divine Spirit has descended once more on a man, Krishnamurti...that God had spoken through Krishnamurti... and that some were able to perceive the Christ in Krishnamurti....

Here then, is a "World Teacher" who adopts divine personae from at least three major religions, paving the way (along with Ramakrishna's above-noted persona, p.306) for Sathya Sai Baba's claim to be the "God of all religions". And there may

¹³ See, e.g., Mary Lutyens (1975), p.46.

¹⁴ Sathya Sai Baba (25-12-1979) S14 45:288 NB Whilst Sathya Sai Baba is obviously referring to Jesus, it is interesting to note an Āndhra precedent for a star heralding the birth of an avatar in hagiographical accounts of Vīra Brahmam—see Velcheru Narayana Rao (1996), p.203.

even have been some direct influence here, Padmanaban (2000:261) writes of Sathya Sai Baba's school days:

In those days, the singing of a prayer composed by Rabindranath Tagore¹⁵, began daily sessions in schools established by Annie Besant of the Theosophical Society. The same prayer was sung in Raju's [Sathya Sai Baba's] school...

Moment to moment, Thy clarion call resounds—
Hearing Thy magnanimous words,
Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Parsees, Muslims and Christians
Come from East and West to Thy throne,
Making the garland of Love.
Hail to Thee who unites all humanity!

Moreover, Sathya Sai Baba recalls that it was he himself who was charged with leading the recitals of this prayer (in Sanskrit):

In the school I used to lead the prayers everyday. There was a platform with a few steps. In the prayer there was a song which ran as follow[s].

*Aharaha thava aahvaana prachaarita
shuni thava Udaara Vaani
Hindu Bauddha Sikha Jaina Paarasika Mussalmaano Christaani.*

Even in those days there was the recognition of the oneness of all religions.¹⁶

Growing up reciting daily before his whole school praise to a deity 'who unites all humanity' might conceivably have fostered in the young Sathya Sai Baba the seeds of his soon to be patent aspirations to fulfil such a role.

It is interesting to note that one aspect of the manner in which Krishnamurti understood the manifestation of his own new-found identity as World-Teacher parallels what we are told of Sathya Sai Baba's early identifications with Shirdi Sai Baba. These identifications seem to have occurred only partially at first—Padmanaban (2000:146) reports a devotee's testimony that Shirdi Sai Baba spoke through Raju [the young boy ('Abbayi') who would become Sathya Sai Baba] with the claim "I was coming off and on, at certain times, to Abbayi these days. Hereafter, I am He'... the implication being that he 'was now fully Sai Baba'. Similarly, as Mary Lutyens (1975:225) writes, in Krishnamurti's case, it was understood that:

¹⁵ As Halbfass (1988:247,395) notes, 'Rabindranath Tagore (Ṭhākura, 1861-1941)... was to become the most celebrated poet of modern India'. He was the son of 'Debendranath Tagore (Devendranātha Ṭhākura, 1817-1905)'—'the second major figure in the history of the Brāhma Samāj, its most effective reorganizer and, in a sense, its second founder'. NB 'Brāhma Samāj' is presumably a Sanskritization (with "correct" *saṃdhi*) of "Brāhmo Samāj" (the Bengali idiom)—Halbfass often "corrects" popular transliterations (e.g. "Rammohan" instead of "Rammohun").

¹⁶ (20-10-1990) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume23/sss23-29.pdf> [7-3-2007]

‘the Lord would come more and more [into Krishnamurti’s body] whenever there was the occasion or the special need for him’... ‘He’ would continue to use it [‘the Vehicle—Krishnamurti’s body’] only intermittently, though more frequently. ...‘He would have to get the Vehicle used to Him’.

Perhaps, then, this is some genuine “psychic” (/psychological) phenomenon—akin to the “channelling” noted above (p.329), but in Krishnamurti’s case at least, “the Vehicle” never did “get used to” it—Bassuk (1987b:121-123) notes:

Besant’s dreams were shortlived... Krishnamurti... had begun to believe in an eternal life-force that was without form... he had never been able to read through a Theosophical book in his life—could not understand...Theosophical “jargon”, and, although he had heard many Theosophical lectures, none of them had convinced him of their knowledge of Truth.... Towards the end of 1927 Besant announced in India that Krishnamurti was an amsavatar, a partial Avatar.... Krishnamurti [said] ‘that neither Buddha nor Christ had claimed divinity or wished to found a religion... [and] that he was not divine but rather the ‘natural flower of the world’.... He insisted upon the human ascent, not the divine descent... Krishnamurti resigned from the Theosophical Society saying he felt sorry for the unfortunate Theosophists....

On a more personal level, Krishnamurti was also disenchanted at this time due to the death of his brother—who the “Masters” had assured him would not die¹⁷.

A few years prior to this, in 1923, a prominent Theosophical author by the name of Alice Bailey had founded a separate organization known as the “Arcane School”. Like many Theosophical authors, she claimed to write under the guidance of the “Masters”, but she promoted in particular the idea, derived from Western astrology, of an imminent “Aquarian Age” (foundational to many subsequent “New Age” groups)¹⁸. Significantly for our interests, in connection with this idea, Bailey later contributed strongly to the idea of the imminent “Reappearance of the Christ”—writing a book with this title, in which she casts Hercules, Hermes, Vyāsa, Buddha, and Christ as avatars¹⁹. Bailey (1948:164,4,8)—writing in the shadow of World War 2, and likening the society of her time to the ‘corrupt Roman Empire’ into which Jesus made his appearance—draws upon *Bhagavad-Gītā* 4:7-8 to conclude that avatars ‘come when evil is rampant. For this reason, if for no other, an Avatar may be looked for today. The necessary stage is set for the re-appearance of the Christ’. Such expectations must have contributed to the general environment into which, beginning at around the same time as Bailey published her book, Sathya Sai Baba was able to successfully stake his claim to be the avatar.

¹⁷ DMSSB 281

¹⁸ NB On Bailey and the “New Age”, see Steven J Sutcliffe (2003).

¹⁹ See Bailey (1948), pp.103ff.

There is also perhaps a case for Sathya Sai Baba's understanding of the avatar as embodying the principle of love (e.g. pp.73,208 above) owing some debt to Bailey's ideas. Drawing upon Christian emphases of the overarching importance of compassionate love, Bailey (1948:9,13) proclaims that Jesus, as an avatar, 'embodied in Himself the divine Principle of Love', and that it is this 'Avatar of Love' who is set to make his 'reappearance'. 'Love' is a major theme of Bailey's ideas, and, so too, further to what we have seen earlier of this, is it a major theme of Sathya Sai Baba's avatar persona. He describes himself as 'the embodiment of *Prema*'²⁰, or 'the embodiment of Love', and states that:

It is to confer such love on the people that the Lord incarnates on earth. He Himself demonstrates how love should be expressed. He showers His love and teaches everyone how to love [(18-10-1991) S24 25:285].

Of course, there is also some debt here to purāṇic representations of the importance of 'love' (*prema*) in relation to Kṛṣṇa (see p.265)—to whom Sathya Sai Baba, unlike Bailey, often refers in this connection—but perhaps the more ethical sense of his proclamations owes something to the environment created by her ideas.

Bailey (1948:77-79) also especially promotes the idea that the avatar-to-come is working "behind the scenes", as it were, to prepare the world for his appearance, and that an 'Avatar of Synthesis', a 'Silent Avatar', would appear before him to assist the world in 'preparation for Christ's reappearance'. Assisted by a posse of spiritually advanced persons, the 'New Group of World Servers', he will promote:

universal recognition of the *one humanity*, brought about by right human relations.
...universal recognition that there is *One World*. ...universal recognition that the *sons of men are one*.

Bailey (1948:13) writes that:

When the Christ, the Avatar of Love, makes His reappearance then will the "*Sons of men who are now the Sons of God* ...radiate that light upon the *sons of men who know not yet they are the Sons of God*. Then shall the Coming One appear.

And, whilst Sathya Sai Baba does not refer to any of the specific details of Bailey's understandings in this regard²¹, the general sense of what he proclaims to be his own mission—prepared for by Shirdi Sai Baba, and culminating in Prema Sai—can also be seen as a parallel to, or perhaps even a distant and distorted echo of, this.

²⁰ Sathya Sai Baba(22-01-1960) S1 25:154

²¹ NB Bailey's Christian-influenced language—i.e. "Sons of men", "Sons of God" finds no place in Sathya Sai Baba's vocabulary. Sathya Sai Baba does often invoke the Christian idea of "God the Father"—but mostly only via the Masonic (/Quaker/Unitarian etc.) ideal of "the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man". Some Masons, at least, promote (the very un-Christian) belief in Jesus as an avatar alongside other avatars (<http://www.ephesians5-11.org/fogbom.htm> [9-7-2007]).

He lists three distinct but complementary functions as being the respective purposes of his three Sai avatars: ‘revealing Divinity’, ‘awakening Divinity’ and ‘propagating Divinity’²², elsewhere elaborating as follows:

The previous Avatar, Shirdi Baba, laid the base for secular integration.... The mission of the present Avatar is to make everybody realise that since the same God or divinity resides in everyone, people should respect, love and help each other irrespective of caste, color or creed. ...Prema Sai, the third Avatar, shall promote the evangel that not only does God reside in everybody, but everyone himself is God. ...The vital issue is the ONENESS: one caste, one class, one creed of humanity.... Love is the basis, the common denominator ...the cementing, unifying, integrating factor between man and man and man and God [GLI 7-8].

Certainly, Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings have found favour amongst many Westerners influenced by “New Age” thinking.

The Theosophical Society, and its offshoots²³, can partly be understood as a manifestation of a wave of European fascination with the occult (spiritualism, psychic phenomena etc.) which began towards the end of the eighteenth century. As Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (2004:17-18) writes:

a reaction to the rationalist Enlightenment, taking the form of a quickening romantic temper, an interest in the Middle Ages and a desire for mystery, encouraged a revival of occultism in Europe from about 1770.

On a more widespread and popular level, this “desire for mystery” saw the rise of many “psychic” stage-performers and “magicians”, and, intriguingly, Sathya Sai Baba claims a place for one of the more recent exponents of this performative genre in his personal mythology.

This is Polish psychic Wolf Messing (1899-1974), who Sathya Sai Baba claims to have met on more than one occasion, and who he evidently holds in high regard:

It was 1937. This body was then 11 years of age. I was then moving the whole day with groups of boys who gathered around me. I was then at Kamalapur in Cuddapah District [Fig.23]. I was one day near the station at Kamalapur with the boys. On seeing me, one person ran up to me, took me in his arms and kissed me, with tears pouring down his cheeks and uttering the words, “I am so happy. I am so happy.” ...As we moved off he was standing riveted to the spot, wistfully watching me until I disappeared from view. It was Messing.... Only those who know the *Brahman* (Supreme Truth) Principle can recognise It. Messing had the *Aathma* (divine self) ever in his mind and so he was able to announce that he had attained the awareness.²⁴

Messing’s principal biographer, Tatiana Lungina (1989:119) makes no mention of

²² (28-9-1990) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume23/sss23-28.pdf> [13-7-2007]

²³ Most famously, in addition to the Arcane School, Rudolph Steiner’s “Anthroposophy”.

²⁴ Sathya Sai Baba (22-11-1980) S14 57:365

this incident—however, she does tell of his visiting India several times from 1927 onwards, and that while there he ‘devoted much time to studying, becoming personally acquainted with the yogis’, so the encounter is at least plausible²⁵. She does say (pp.45ff.), however, that he stopped travelling in 1937, and this perhaps rules out a further encounter claimed by Sathya Sai Baba, who says of Messing:

After twenty years, he again visited India. This time he brought a Kirlian camera²⁶, which was capable of taking photographs of the aura around human beings... When he arrived at Bangalore he found a huge congregation. On enquiry, he came to know that they were waiting for Sathya Sai Baba’s *Darshan*. He too waited for My *Darshan*. When I was moving amidst the congregation, he saw Me and thought to himself, “Yes, this is the same person whom I saw as a boy many years ago. He has the same divine effulgence surrounding him”.²⁷

Indeed, when we also consider some of Sathya Sai Baba’s other usages of Messing’s story, it would seem likely that Sathya Sai Baba’s version of events bears as little relationship to the facts of history as did his accounts of al-Hallāj and Buddha (cited p.256-258). Certainly, as we saw in these, he turns Messing into something of a Hindu, and an *advaitin*—with ‘the *Aathma* (divine self) ever in his mind’.

Sathya Sai Baba portrays ‘a tall personality wearing a white robe’ as inspiring Messing to follow the spiritual path and take up travelling²⁸, whereas, as Lungina (1989:25,146,168) reports, according to Messing’s own recollections, this figure—when he soon discovered him to be a friend of his father sent to scare him into attending school—only contributed to his atheism. I would note, however, that, whilst Beyerstein considers Sathya Sai Baba’s further account of Messing (which I have not cited here) untenable because of references to Messing’s supposed encounters with Hitler, Stalin, Einstein and Freud²⁹, an examination of Messing’s biography reveals this scepticism to be unfounded—or at least overly dismissive³⁰—

²⁵ NB It is interesting to note in this connection that Messing carried a ‘talisman’ (Lungina, p.118)—a gold ring on which ‘four platinum teeth held a broad massive diamond of approximately 3 carats’ (p.24) and which mysteriously disappeared after his death (p.175)—all of which is highly reminiscent of devotees accounts of rings given to them by Sathya Sai Baba (a photograph of this ring is given in the centre section of Lungina’s book).

²⁶ NB On Semyon Kirlian (1898-1978) and Messing see: <http://bdsteel.tripod.com/More/stories3.htm> [22-2-2007], and references cited in n.30 below.

²⁷ (31-8-2002) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/do20831.html> NB There is perhaps a parallel for this identification of an avatar by a modern psychic perhaps in Theosophical leader Bishop Leadbeater’s identification of the young Krishnamurti ‘by his aura’ (see, e.g., W. Alder (1991), p.8).

²⁸ (31-08-2002) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/do20831.html> [6-3-2007]

²⁹ http://www.exbaba.de/files/A_Critical_Study.html [5-3-2005]

³⁰ NB For a thorough (if somewhat slanted) account of Sathya Sai Baba’s references to Messing, and for more on Messing himself (including references to another of his biographers), see an online arti-

for, according to his biographer, Messing did indeed encounter all of these figures. But it is clear that Sathya Sai Baba's main interest in Messing is obviously as an external ("rational") authority through which to promote his avatar persona and *advaita* beliefs—as Beyerstein puts it (in words that I have cited several times), Sathya Sai Baba is 'more interested in the moral of the story than the morality of telling the story inaccurately'. We will see yet another example of this shortly.

Returning briefly to Krishnamurti, we may note that, despite his disavowal of his identity as the World Teacher, he nonetheless embarked upon an impressive career as a philosopher, in which he was assisted in no small measure (in publishing his ideas) by D. Rajagopalacharya—whose wife (an acquaintance from the Theosophical Society's "ashram" in Ojai, California) and step-daughter would become, in 1969, some of the earliest Western devotees of Sathya Sai Baba³¹. Krishnamurti himself is said to have 'secretly' met Sathya Sai Baba in the early nineteen-eighties, but what transpired at this meeting, other than that 'Krishnamurti presented a rose to Swami', is known only to those who were present at the time³².

This last information comes from a spiritual autobiography written by Diana Baskin, Rajagopal's stepdaughter. This work was published in 1990, and, interestingly from our point of view, begins by juxtaposing the birth-date of Sathya Sai Baba ('November 23, 1926') with a statement attributed to another major modern Indian claimant to the office of avatar—Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950):

*Twenty-fourth November, 1926, was the descent of
Krishna into the physical. A power infallible shall lead
the thought, in earthly hearts kindle the Immortal's Fire,
even the multitude shall hear the voice !*

This statement (actually a conflation of a diary entry, and three excerpts from an epic poem, written by Aurobindo³³) soon (or perhaps even prior to this) found its way into Sathya Sai Baba lore—such as circulates amongst his more esoterically

cle by the anti-Sai activist Nagel (http://home.hetnet.nl/~ex_baba/engels/articles/Paper_WM_2.htm [22-2-2007]). Another article by Brian Steel (who I cited on the previous page) is also relevant here (<http://bdsteel.tripod.com/More/stories4Messing2.htm> [6-3-2007]). NB I wrote the above before consulting either of these articles.

³¹ NB Rajagopal also, evidently, became greatly devoted to Sathya Sai Baba. Despite never meeting him in person, he often received correspondence and greetings from him via his wife, and, according to his stepdaughter, Sathya Sai Baba claimed that he (magically) 'came to Ojai and brought Raja back to life' on Easter Sunday of 1988 after Raja—who 'always had a deep love and link with Christ'—had been comatose with pneumonia and was 'supposed to have died' (DMSSB 285-287).

³² DMSSB 284

³³ I cite and discuss the statement below. The excerpts come from Aurobindo's epic poem *Savitri*, Book 11 (<http://www.savitribysriaurobindo.com/books/book11canto1.html> [25-1-2007])

inclined (usually Western)—devotees, and in 1994 Sathya Sai Baba himself gave an interpretation of its significance:

On November 24th 1926, Aurobindo broke his prolonged silence only to declare that God had incarnated the previous day. After making this significant statement, he continued with his vow of silence.³⁴

There is more here than can be gleaned from Baskin's version; Sathya Sai Baba is evidently aware of Aurobindo's proclamation via other sources, and again, of course, exemplifies his propensity for focusing upon the "moral of the story" at the expense of historical details—he goes on to proclaim that 'Divinity can be recognized only by the pure hearted.'

Bassuk (1987a:81) cites Aurobindo's own, somewhat technical, version:

The 24th of November, 1926, was the descent of Krishna into the physical. Krishna is not the supramental Light. The descent of Krishna would mean the descent of the Overmental Godhead preparing, though not itself actually, the descent of the Supermind and Ananda. Krishna supports the evolution through the Overmind leading it towards his Ananda.

And, whilst much of the detail here is obviously missing from Sathya Sai Baba's statement, this is evidently not due to a mere ignorance on his part of Aurobindo's jargon, for he elsewhere discourses at length upon: '1. Super mind, 2. Higher mind, 3. Illumination mind and 4. Over mind' (albeit that his understanding of these is considerably different from that of Aurobindo)³⁵. Sathya Sai Baba is also evidently aware of something of the context in Aurobindo's spiritual career in which this event occurred—although, contrary to Sathya Sai Baba's claim, Aurobindo's statement was not made until some time after the event in question³⁶ and Aurobindo's period of 'silence' was more properly a period of seclusion³⁷, which itself only began (immediately) after the event described here³⁸.

Aurobindo and his followers exclusively interpret this event as an incarnation of the divine in and through Aurobindo himself—rather than any independent external avatar—it is commemorated as the 'Day of Siddhi' [i.e. his "attainment"]³⁹.

³⁴ (19-10-1999) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/d991019.html> [6-3-2007]

³⁵ See, e.g., (20-11-2000) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/d001120.html> [6-3-2007]; cf., e.g., Aurobindo's views as described by Ram Shankar Misra (1998), pp.359-366. NB Neither Sathya Sai Baba's nor Aurobindo's usages of these terms seem to relate much to traditional avatar concepts as such—they focus more upon human "ascent" to deity status than the "descent" of a deity.

³⁶ K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar (1972), p. 989.

³⁷ Sisirkumar Mitra (1972), p. 149.

³⁸ Srinivasa Iyengar (1972), p.990.

³⁹ See: Srinivasa Iyengar (1978), v.1, pp.235-236; <http://intyoga.online.fr/siddhi.htm> [25-1-2007]

There is little trace of this meaning in Sathya Sai Baba's version, and, as we have often seen to be the case, Sathya Sai Baba's version further exhibits an ethical/spiritual imperative—the implication being that ordinary devotees also would recognise Sathya Sai Baba's divinity if only they were to keep their hearts pure, and perhaps practise silence (something which he elsewhere often recommends⁴⁰). But, whilst Sathya Sai Baba has clearly made this tradition his own⁴¹, it is reasonable to assume that his initial acquaintance with it came via his devotees, several of whom evidently had some connection with, and/or interest in, Aurobindo⁴².

And, despite what we have noted to be the generally self-directed and self-proclaimed nature of Sathya Sai Baba's divine persona, there is another prominent example of at least a minor influence that some of his devotees may have had in this regard. American devotee Tal Brooke, who, as noted earlier, later denounced Sathya Sai Baba and converted to Christianity, gave a speech at Sathya Sai Baba's birthday festival in 1970, proclaiming:

Now Kalki, the avatar, is here with the Sword of Truth.... For the Bible also says, "He will wear blood-red robes... He will ride a white horse⁴³... On his robes will be written King of Kings, Lord of Lords". Truth, the very Truth of God is about to revolutionize the world....⁴⁴

The biblical passage referred to here is *Revelation* 19:9ff:

Blessed *are* they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb... heaven opened, and behold a white horse ; and he that sat upon him *was* called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes *were* as a flame of fire, and on his head *were* many crowns ; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. And he *was* clothed with a vesture dipped in blood; and his name is called The Word of God.⁴⁵

Two years after Brooke's above-cited speech, during a Christmas Eve discourse,

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Sathya Sai Baba (19-7-1970) S10 16:99.

⁴¹ NB Alexandra Nagel (<http://www.saiguru.net/english/articles/o2shivashakti.htm> [19-2-2006]) notes suggestions that Sathya Sai Baba was not actually born on 23rd of November 1926, but rather in 1929—as is attested by his school records—and hence may have fabricated his 'official' birth date in order to fit in with Aurobindo's statement. But, as Padmanaban (2000:65) writes: 'It has long been a practice in the schools to record a date of birth as being much later than the 'actual' date of birth—in order to facilitate career prospects'. To suggest any more of a conspiracy than this on the part of Sathya Sai Baba (or his family/devotees) hardly seems necessary here. Cf. (<http://home.hetnet.nl/~ex-baba/engels/articles/schoolrecord.html> [1-3-2007])

⁴² E.g. Baskin (mentioned above), and Gokak. See also p.343 below. NB Pedda Bottu (2005:262) claims that 'a great sage' made this connection for her in 1979, i.e. prior to the above-cited versions.

⁴³ NB On the significance of the association of Kalki with a horse, see Gonda (1965), pp.111-114.

⁴⁴ LOTA 128 NB Brooke evidently also presented this claim to Sathya Sai Baba some months prior to this speech—see GC 56-57.

⁴⁵ *The Holy Bible* (King James Version).

Sathya Sai Baba presented his own interpretation of this passage—perhaps an extrapolation of Brooke’s ideas. The biblical verses supposedly record a vision of an early Christian saint, but Sathya Sai Baba frames them as a statement of Jesus⁴⁶:

At the moment when Jesus was merging in the Supreme Principle of Divinity⁴⁷, He communicated some news to his followers, which has been interpreted in a variety of ways by commentators and those who relish the piling of writings on writings and meanings upon meanings, until it all swells up into a huge mess... The statement of Christ is simple: “He who sent me among you will come again!” and he pointed to a Lamb. The Lamb is merely a symbol, a sign. It stands for the Voice---Ba-Ba; the announcement was the Advent of Baba. “His Name will be Truth,” Christ declared. Sathya means Truth. “He will wear a robe of red, a blood-red robe.” (Here Baba pointed to the robe He was wearing!). “He will be short, with a crown (of hair). The Lamb is the sign and symbol of Love.” Christ did not declare that he will come again. He said, “He who made me will come again.” That Ba-ba is this Baba and Sai, the short, curly-hair-crowned red-robed Baba, is come.⁴⁸

Bowen (1985:485) sees the last point here as ‘a case where an attempted onomatopoeic pun mis-fires and is potentially offensive’, and certainly most Christians would take exception to Sathya Sai Baba’s statement—this is transcendent inclusivism. For him, however, it serves the familiar purpose of providing authority (via an external validator⁴⁹) for his avatar claim, and, once again, he follows on immediately from the above to push *advaita* sentiments such as we have seen to be characteristic of this type of inclusivism: ‘He is not only in this Form, but, he is in every one of you, as the dweller in the Heart. ...This is the inner mystery of Incarnation, God incarnating in all! All are One; The One is All’.

Interestingly, Sathya Sai Baba omits any mention of the Kalki avatar, who is traditionally depicted as riding a horse (hence Brooke’s connection (through resemblance) to the above-described Christian eschatological figure). Indeed, Sathya Sai Baba does not often identify himself as Kalki⁵⁰, and, sometimes, when he does,

⁴⁶ NB Beyerstein picks up on such discrepancies between Sathya Sai Baba’s citations of biblical passages and traditional versions (http://www.exbaba.de/files/A_Critical_Study.html [5-3-2005]).

⁴⁷ NB The reference here is presumably to the “transfiguration” of Jesus as described in the Bible (e.g., *Matthew* 17:1ff.)—in which context, however, no reference is made to “the Lamb”.

⁴⁸ Sathya Sai Baba (24-12-1972) S11 54:346

⁴⁹ NB There is a sense in which Jesus acts as a “transcendent” source of legitimation by the fact of his “alienness” (cf. p.261,n.32). I would also note that there is a sense in which what Sathya Sai Baba is doing is akin to what Jesus himself is portrayed as having done to legitimate his own religious role (“Moses spoke of me”). Mohammed’s legitimating himself as “Ahmed”, “the comforter”—i.e. “the Holy Spirit” of which Jesus spoke—can be seen as a similar case.

⁵⁰ One such rare (supposed) instance is described in Sathyam-1 50-51. Ruhela (1996b) has written a whole book on *Sri Sathya Sai as Kalki Avatar*, but more than half of this work consists of an appendix on the ten traditional avatars, a quarter describes purāṇic prophecies and “the contemporary

it is in an idiosyncratic manner:

Kalpas, manvantaras and caturyugas have come and will come again. Many *caturyugas* have come and in those *caturyugas*, *daśāvatāras* (ten incarnations) will advent. In the present *caturyuga*, the tenth *avatāra*, Kalki, has split into three aspects as the forms of Shirdi Sai, Sathya Sai and Prema Sai. This has not happened before and can only be seen in this Kaliyuga. Sai *avatāras* neither had [*sic*] taken place in earlier Kaliyugas nor will take place in future Kaliyugas [SSSA 67].

Here, we revisit some of the traditional theories positing a cycle of four epochs (*catu-yuga*), in which, as I noted earlier (p.196), the Kalki avatar is scheduled to appear at the end of the fourth and final epoch, the “Kaliyuga” in which we are presently believed to be living. A cycle of four epochs is traditionally known as a *manvantara*⁵¹, and is said to end with a dissolution (*pralaya*) of the Universe, with (typically) two-thousand of these cycles constituting a *kalpa*—which is said to equate to a day in the life of the creator deity Brahṁā⁵². And the form of the reasoning that Sathya Sai Baba employs above is also quite traditional, in that the *kalpa* system is sometimes appealed to by traditional scholars in their attempts to harmonize the many variants of particular stories given in the different Purāṇas⁵³, but the splitting of the Kalki avatar into three parts and the sense of singularity, that this event has never happened before and will not repeat, is innovative—very much a case of: “It is written..., but I say unto you...”.

Interestingly, in elaborating upon this, he innovates yet further, as well as further employing this form. He compares ‘Shirdi Sai avatar to a mother cooking food, Sathya Sai avatar to a mother serving food, Prema Sai avatar to a mother washing the vessels’⁵⁴, and elsewhere, uses this analogy to justify some of Shirdi Sai Baba’s more controversial behaviour:

During Shirdi *avatāra*, I was preparing the food. In Sathya Sai *avatāra*, I am serving the food. People say that Sri Shirdi Baba used to get angry. While preparing the food, if the children trouble the cook, will he not get angry? [SSSA 66-67]

world crisis” (i.e. the Kaliyuga), and—in the twenty-odd pages he writes defending the “Sai devotees’ claim: Sri Sathya Sai is Kalki Avatar”—he draws more upon non-Kalki related “prophecies” (like that of Jesus cited above), and even (p.65) specifically states that it is necessary in this context to ‘discard the traditional Puranic image of Kalki Avatar wielding a sword and riding a white horse’.

⁵¹ Literally an “interval between two Manu’s”. Manu is given in early traditions as the name of the first post-diluvian progenitor of mankind—often described as a Hindu equivalent of the Biblical Noah—but, in this (purāṇic) context, since there are repeated *pralayas*, ‘Manu’ acts more as a title, with the many (usually fourteen) Manus having individual names in addition to this.

⁵² CDHMR 381-383

⁵³ E.g. Srinivasa Chari (1994:208) reiterates a variant on this belief to “explain” why the ‘versions of the *avatāra* as narrated in the Vedas are somewhat different from those found in the Purāṇas’.

⁵⁴ SVAND 142

I have not come across any passage in which Sathya Sai Baba unpacks the analogy of ‘food’ given in these statements, and have been unable to think up any elegant explanation for them myself, but we again have a case of: “People say..., but I tell you that it is not so”. And yet another of his proclamations in this area also follows this form:

It is said that this Kaliyuga is the final *yuga* and it will end in a *pralaya*.... There will be no *pralaya*. ...If some part of the house is damaged, would you demolish the whole house or just repair that part which is damaged? Similarly, I will repair that part of the world which is damaged [(1958) SSSA 109].

Here, in addition to simply providing some psychological assurance to his devotees, he is perhaps defending his identity as the Kalki avatar in the face of differences between this avatar’s traditional mission (executing evil-doers by the sword and ushering in the *pralaya*) and his own (social service, individual reform).

But, in any case, what we have just seen is more than most of the other major modern Indian avatars have done to identify themselves with Kalki. Bassuk (1987b:102) sees “Apocalyptic Expectation” as a “mytheme” central to ideas of the avatar, and writes that: ‘From Chaitanya to Satya Sai Baba, each modern Avatar has been regarded as Kalki, the final Avatar’. But Sarkar (1997:314) notes that Ramakrishna, at most “toyed” with identifying himself as the Kalki avatar, and whilst various less famous figures have adopted this role⁵⁵, Aurobindo, Krishnamurti, and the other modern avatars who I have mentioned seem to have been largely silent on this matter. T.L.Palotas (1990:56) notes, however, a claim of the modern *guru* Shiva Balayogi (b.1935) that: ‘He is here. He will come out in a few days, or a few years... Kalki Avatar is coming to take care of all the world problems’, so there clearly is some popular expectation of Kalki’s imminent arrival.

Perhaps the reason why more modern figures have not more strongly identified themselves with Kalki has to do with the potentially problematic nature of the traditional role allotted to him. As we saw earlier, *dharma* is held to perpetually decline over a cycle of four *yugas*, with a major avatar being scheduled to arrive at the end of each *yuga* in order to protect the virtuous and destroy the wicked. We saw that the cycle of *yugas* begins with a *kṛta yuga*, in which *dharma* is at its zenith, and ends with a *kali yuga* (such as the one in which we are presently believed to be living), in which *dharma* reaches its nadir and Kalki appears to usher in a dissolution (*pralaya*) of the universe⁵⁶. However strongly the modern avatars

⁵⁵ See, e.g.: Julia Howell (1977); Sarkar (1989).

⁵⁶ CDHMR 381-383

may condemn the decline of *dharma* in the current age, few, it would seem, are willing to advocate the annihilation of the universe as a potential solution to this problem. Even in versions of the Kalki story in which only the wicked are annihilated, the image of Kalki riding over the earth to ‘massacre’ these with his sword⁵⁷ can hardly much appeal to modern Hindus raised on the (originally, predominantly, Jain and Buddhist) ideal of *ahiṃsā* (“non-violence”—much popularized in recent times by Gandhi)⁵⁸. Still, this has not stopped many modern figures from identifying themselves, or being identified, as avatars. We have already encountered several of these, and will encounter yet more in the next section.

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Tagare (1978), Part V, p.2132 (*Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 12:2.16).

⁵⁸ NB On Kalki and ‘The Problem of Millenarism in India’ see Erik Af Edholm (1975), pp.34-36.

5.4 Assorted Avatars

The Avatar is one only, and this one body is taken by the Avatar.¹

Despite the didactic purposes evident in the passages encountered in the previous section in which we saw Sathya Sai Baba cite the testimony of various spiritual authorities (i.e. Messing, Aurobindo, and Jesus) as evidence of his avatarhood, it is clear that Sathya Sai Baba does sometimes present himself in a very real sense as having some special claim to avatar status. Elsewhere also, rather than promoting the ideal of “God incarnating in all” (cf. p.339 above), Sathya Sai Baba, as we have already seen, denies the title of avatar to even the founders of the major world religions (see p.251 above). Moreover, whilst, as noted earlier, Parrinder (1970:122) considers it a ‘strength’ of the doctrine of the repetition of avatars ‘that it made possible the inclusion of mythical beings of the past, and heroes of the present, within the same system’, and whilst we saw that Sathya Sai Baba draws upon this supposed ‘strength’ in a general way, we find him refusing to accept some of the minor traditional avatars from sharing his status, saying that they ‘are called Avatars only by courtesy’². He also excludes any of the other well known modern Indian religious leaders even from the category of “saint”, let alone that of avatar (with the exception of course of Shirdi Sai Baba)—dismissing them as merely being ‘scholars and heads of religious sects’³. And when he does treat such figures inclusivistically, this is very much subordinating inclusivism: ‘All the gurus in India are like so many teachers in a school. Swamiji is like the principal!’⁴ Distinguishing himself from various modern figures, he proclaims: ‘By their own effort they have risen to the level of Godhead, but with the infinite powers I possess, I have come from the level of Godhead to redeem mankind’⁵. Or again, in specific regard to Aurobindo, he claims ‘He was Vyaktinatha [“Lord of the individual” (i.e. of himself?)] and I am Lokanatha [“Lord of the World”]’⁶.

But, that Sathya Sai Baba should profess any views at all in this regard can perhaps itself be understood in continuity with the ideas of Aurobindo—for Bassuk (1987a:82) observes that ‘Aurobindo began a twentieth-century phenomenon in

¹ Sathya Sai Baba (c.1968-1978) C XX 63

² SSV 91

³ C XL 105-106 (1968-1978)

⁴ GC 81

⁵ http://media.radiosai.org/Journals/Vol_03/11NOV01/ [4-11-2005]

⁶ Sathya Sai Baba cited in B. Narasimha Murthy (2004:327)—cf. http://www.kheper.net/topics/gurus/Sai_Baba_and_Aurobindo.html [1-3-2007]

which Avatars analyse and discriminate between who is and who is not an Avatar'⁷. Aurobindo also held that avatars come to assist 'the birth of man into the Godhead, man rising into the divine nature and consciousness'⁸—perhaps echoing ideas of Radhakrishnan, by whom he was undoubtedly influenced, and who similarly held that: 'The divine comes down to the earthly plane in order to raise it up to a higher level'⁹. Moreover, Aurobindo (1970:155) writes that:

The Avatar is always a dual phenomenon of divinity and humanity; ...otherwise the object of the Avatar's descent is not fulfilled; for that object is precisely to show that the human type of consciousness can be compatible with the divine essence of consciousness made manifest, can be converted into its vessel.

And this perhaps goes some way towards explaining Sathya Sai Baba's ambivalent presentations of himself as both on a par with 'all' people and yet superior to even the greatest of them—for Sathya Sai Baba likewise declares that: 'The *avathaara* behaves in a human way so that mankind can feel kinship, but, rises to super-human heights so that mankind can aspire to those heights'¹⁰.

The quotation at the head of this section, an answer to a devotee's question as to whether 'God' should only be understood as appearing in the form of Sathya Sai Baba, further illustrates this. He goes on from this to qualify his answer: 'Of course, a brilliant light spreads outward into rays, but the rays are not different from the light'. Are we to take his statement at top as excluding the validity of other modern claimants to avatar status, or should we think that he wishes us to conceptualise such claimants as 'rays' of himself ("teachers in his school")—a type of coordinating, but still subordinating, inclusivism? Perhaps the ambiguity here is deliberate—consider an answer that Sathya Sai Baba elsewhere gives to a devotee's concern as to the 'difficulty that arises in doing honor to two different aspects of the Lord. For example, Mother in Sri Aurobindo's ashram, and Swamiji here':

There are two ways; one in which the Divine is seen everywhere, and then there is no conflict whatsoever; and the other way in which one feels strong devotion to one single person and is happy in that devotion. In the latter case, one should hold strictly to that guru and have nothing to do with other gurus [(1-1968) C II 15-16].

Ultimately, however, as we have often seen to be the case in his teachings, the theme of *advaita* prevails: "the rays are not different from the light". This is transcendent inclusivism; one-pointed devotion is merely a means to the end of

⁷ On this see Aurobindo (1970), v.14, pp.403ff.

⁸ Sri Aurobindo (1970), v.9., p.140.

⁹ Parrinder (1970), p.111.

¹⁰ (10-2-1963) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume03/sss03-09.pdf> [12-7-2007]

achieving the realization that “the Divine is everywhere”. And the question of the avatar being ‘one only’ is analogous to another that he is asked: ‘if one ant out of a colony of ants is killed, is that killing an individual Jiva [soul]? Or, is there a sort of group Jiva whose body is the colony of ants?’ He answers: ‘There are no individual Jivas. Jiva is one only. Only one. Jiva is never injured, never killed. ...Bodies may be killed, may die. But Jiva is unaffected Jiva is one and eternal’¹¹.

This said, as I noted in Section 1.4 above, there a significant difference in the degree of intensity and self-assertion with which the avatar personae of Sathya Sai Baba and other modern Indian avatars have been constructed—with Sathya Sai Baba being unusually forceful and direct in this regard. And Sathya Sai Baba certainly does not go to such lengths to present any other modern figure (with the exception, of course, of his namesake Shirdi Sai Baba) as being an avatar on a par with himself. Some of his references to Ramakrishna, for example, highlight this—indeed, they even show ambivalence in according him divine status; he sometimes presents Ramakrishna as an ideal devotee, at other times uses Ramakrishna as an example of an ideal *guru*, and in only one instance refers to him as ‘the Lord’¹² [i.e. *Bhagavān*]. Moreover, he writes that:

Ramakrishna, though he was Divinely born prayed to Kali (for he could not bring it about) to send some one who could preach to the whole world the Dharma that will uproot injustice and selfishness [PremV 77].

And often, as we have seen, Sathya Sai Baba himself takes on the role of the ‘some one’ mentioned here¹³—*the* avatar who (in line with Theosophy-influenced ideas) has come for all persons of all nations and all religions without distinction.

Ramakrishna himself, and his wife and co-avatar Sarada Devi (1854-1920), did make some direct claims to avatar status—however these remain but occasional¹⁴, and Kripal (1995:219) even concludes of Ramakrishna that:

from a historical perspective at least, *Ramakrishna the incarnation was socially cre-*

¹¹ C LI 148 NB Sathya Sai Baba’s last proclamation here is presumably an echo of *Bhagavad-Gītā* 2:17-18—which, as Edgerton (1944:17-18) translates, has Kṛṣṇa say: ‘know that that is indestructible, / By which this all is pervaded; / Destruction of this imperishable one / No one can cause. These bodies come to an end / It is declared, of the eternal embodied (soul), / Which is indestructible and unfathomable.’

¹² Sathya Sai Baba (7-1988) S28 17:138ff,

¹³ NB Devotees’ hagiographical accounts of Sathya Sai Baba also portray a number of other modern Indian avatars (/religious leaders) as testifying to Sathya Sai Baba’s status as the (supreme) avatar—e.g. Ramana Maharshi (see SSSA 86), Shiva Balayogi Maharaj (see Singh 1990:21), Paramahansa Yogananda, Ammachi and others (see <http://www.saibaba-aclearview.com/> [11-3-2007]).

¹⁴ See, e.g., Parrinder (1970), p.107-108; Christopher Isherwood (1965), p.331.

ated through human interaction and the processes of interpretation and debate.... Eventually, as the believers began to outnumber the revilers—and there were many sceptics—Ramakrishna began to believe them.... The social process of interpretation and debate had entered deeply into his soul: “He who was Rāma and he who was Kṛṣṇa is now Rāmakṛṣṇa,” he declared.¹⁵

Even if such a process were to be discounted (Kripal’s methods and conclusions have been strongly criticized¹⁶), it is undeniable that avatar ideas were largely peripheral to Ramakrishna’s teachings—Kripal (1995:25) writes that:

It was desire not a synthesis of doctrine that formed the center of Ramakrishna’s teaching... Indeed, [according to Ramakrishna] if one has “passionate desire.” It matters little whether or not one believes in incarnations’.

Ramakrishna (1965:215) describes the avatar as being:

like a viceroy of a mighty monarch. As the king sends the viceroy when there is any disturbance in some far-off province to quell it, so whenever there is waning of religion in any part of the world, God sends there His Avatara to guard virtue and to foster its growth.

But, for Sathya Sai Baba: ‘God takes human form Himself, to save *Dharma*, without commissioning some other entity to carry out that task’—and Sathya Sai Baba even uses an example in which, he says, an emperor would dive into the river to save his son from drowning rather than merely ordering his minions to do so¹⁷.

In the case of Caitanya also, Bassuk (1987:76) writes:

Did Chaitanya ever proclaim himself to be an avatar or god-man? There is no record of his having done so, and his glorification as an avatar is largely the result of the writings of the poet-devotees who became the “theologians” of the movement.

And, like Ramakrishna and Caitanya, Aurobindo too seems to have had little interest in presenting himself as an avatar—although he evidently did not reject the title of avatar when it was bestowed upon him by his followers¹⁸. In contrast to this, Haraldsson (1997:130) notes that some of Sathya Sai Baba’s early devotees even tried to dissuade the young Sai from identifying himself with Kṛṣṇa, and (as noted earlier, p.32 above) others left his fold on account of their being unable to countenance such identifications.

Another major difference between Sathya Sai Baba and most other modern avatar figures can be seen in their attitudes to miracles. Bassuk (1987b:101) sees ‘SUPER-NATURAL POWERS’ as a mytheme of the avatar traditions, but, whilst this

¹⁵ NB For this last declaration, see, e.g., Pavitrananda (1943), p.595

¹⁶ See, especially, Swami Tyagananda (2000).

¹⁷ Sathya Sai Baba (13-12-1964) S4 45:262.

¹⁸ Sri Aurobindo (1972), v.18, p.445.

certainly applies to Sathya Sai Baba, it does not apply to most of the other major modern avatar figures. Aurobindo (1972:201) avers: ‘There is no miraculous force and I do not deal in miracles’; Meher Baba claims to have ‘never consciously performed a miracle’¹⁹; and Ramakrishna urges his followers to: ‘Visit not miracle-mongers and those who exhibit occult powers. These men are stragglers from the path of Truth’²⁰. More recently also, Bhagavan (b.1949) states ‘I personally do not do any miracles... I am not a miracle worker in that sense’ (on Bhagavan, see p.356 below). Accordingly, Sathya Sai Baba, given his own propensity for “miracle-mongering”, seems to feel a need to justify himself in the face of this type of sentiment—which, whilst harking back to the *Yoga-Sūtra* (3:37), is today often popularly (although by no means exclusively²¹) associated with Ramakrishna. Thus, Sathya Sai Baba says:

Some people remark that Raamakrishna Paramahansa said that *siddhis* [magical powers] are obstructions in the path of the *saadhaka* (spiritual aspirant). Of course they are; he may be led astray by *siddhis*; he has to keep straight on without being involved in them. His ego will increase if he yields to the temptation of demonstrating his *siddhis*. This correct advice, which every *saadhaka* should heed.

The mistake lies in equating Me with the *saadhaka* whom Raamakrishna wanted to help, guide and warn. This is merely the nature of *Avathaara*: the creation of things, *ab initio*, with intent to protect, guard and give joy... [(13-12-1964) S4 45:268].

Siddhis, magical powers, (lit. “attainments”, “perfections”), are traditionally thought to arise in (ordinary) human beings as natural concomitants of certain types of spiritual practice. As indicated here, exhibition of these powers is usually discouraged as being a hindrance to higher spiritual progress, but tradition does allow for even ordinary humans who have completed the spiritual path to display such powers (see, e.g., *Yoga-Sūtra* 3:37)—and thus perhaps it is that we find Sathya Sai Baba emphasizing the distinctive nature of his avatar claim by saying that his powers are not *siddhis* at all, but are natural to him²². In this light we may also understand another of his statements—*viz.*: that the objects which he creates are ‘as lasting as any that is found in nature’²³, for it is believed that objects mani-

¹⁹ Purdom (1964), p.441

²⁰ <http://www.sriramakrishna.org/rksay.htm> [27-2-2007]

²¹ Aurobindo’s above-cited proclamation is a case in point. Babb (1986:195-6) also mentions this in a general way. See also for example, Yogananda (1959), p.50; Madhavananda (1991), p.44.

²² Sathyam-2 (8) 141 NB See also: C (1968-78) XXXIX 104 Cf. Bassuk 1987a:88;1987b:88.

²³ Sathya Sai Baba (17-10-1961) S2 16:73

fested as a result of *siddhis* are generally short-lived²⁴. Yet another of his claims: ‘My powers do not abide in Me a while and then, fade away’²⁵, is no doubt a similar case—since *siddhis* are traditionally thought to fade with use.

But, despite such claims, we find that descriptions of many of the powers claimed by, or ascribed to, Sathya Sai Baba closely parallel traditional descriptions of *siddhis*: greatly enlarging the size of his body²⁶ (which corresponds to traditional descriptions of a *siddhi* named ‘*mahima*’); transcending the law of gravity²⁷ (‘*laghima*’); eating very little²⁸ (‘*anumitva*’); moving his body as fast as thoughts move (‘*manojava*’); taking different physical forms at will²⁹ (‘*kamarupa*’); being immune to heat and cold³⁰ (‘*advandvata*’); hearing and seeing from great distances³¹ (‘*dursravana, durdarsana*’); communicating with devas³² (‘*devakrida dar-sana*’); knowing the past present and future³³ (‘*trikaladarshitva*’); materialising objects³⁴ (‘*kamavasthayitva*’); exhibiting telepathy³⁵ (‘*parachitta abhijnata*’).

And the prominent role that *siddhi*-like powers play in Sathya Sai Baba’s persona is not entirely without precedent amongst modern avatar figures. The list of *siddhis* that I have just quoted, whilst evidently cognate with traditional lists (cf., for example, *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 11:15.3-8), comes from a hagiographical account of Sri Mahaprabhuji (1828-1963)—who was (if this account is to be believed) like Sathya Sai Baba, a self-proclaimed avatar. And Mahaprabhuji’s hagiographer, Madhavananda (1998:44ff.), sees no contradiction in attributing both *siddhis* and avatar-status to his master, claiming that ‘a Divine incarnation is gifted with all twenty-four *siddhis* from birth’. Bowen (1985:341) suggests of Sathya Sai Baba in this regard that:

Given the eminence of Shiva as the supreme manifestation of the power attained by

²⁴ See, e.g., Yogananda (1959), p.191. NB I might point out a parallel here with objects ‘materialized’ by (Western) ‘mediums’, which are similarly ‘short-lived’ (see Haraldsson, 1997, pp.235-236).

²⁵ Sathya Sai Baba (25-12-1970) S10 39:262

²⁶ E.g. in the “Universal Form” described above, p.199.

²⁷ E.g. he is said to have gone into a trance and levitated when Ramana Maharshi died (LIMF 497).

²⁸ (19-11-2000) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume33/sss33-18.pdf> [9-7-2007]; ASN 21

²⁹ See, e.g., p.128 above.

³⁰ E.g. playing barefoot in the Himalayan snows, ‘chiding those who complained of the chillness of the wind’ (Sathyam-1 117).

³¹ E.g. DMSSSB 33ff.

³² See, e.g., p.277 above.

³³ See p.232 above.

³⁴ Cf. p.234 above.

³⁵ Sathyam-2 (8) 141

strenuous asceticism, it is natural that one should find an emphasis on *siddhis* in any cult in which a reverence for Shiva is all-pervasive.

But, as we have just seen, Sathya Sai Baba claims that his powers are not *siddhis*. Moreover, as we have seen, Sathya Sai Baba associates himself as much, if not more, with Viṣṇu as with Śiva. And Sri Mahaprabhuji similarly associates himself with both of these deities. Furthermore, as noted earlier (p.231,n.28) some interpretations of the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* specifically credit Kṛṣṇa with possession of the eight major yogic *siddhis*. Clearly there is no inherent contradiction between avatarhood and displays of yogic power.

Sathya Sai Baba makes no reference to Mahaprabhuji (who did not achieve much fame in his own lifetime, and, in hailing from north-eastern India, is geographically remote from Sathya Sai Baba), but there are more parallels to be seen between miraculous deeds reported of Mahaprabhuji and those of Sathya Sai Baba. Madhavananda (1988:40,42,117,290,293) presents Mahaprabhuji, in his childhood, as sometimes granting visions of a ‘Divine form’. He avers that ‘Mahaprabhuji was gifted with Divine powers since childhood and... his Divine will was able to defeat even death’ [i.e. to resurrect dead persons]. And we have seen Sathya Sai Baba claiming all of these of himself³⁶. Like Sathya Sai Baba, Mahaprabhuji is also presented as fulfilling an eschatological role—drawing upon traditional ideas of *yuga* and *dharma* (cf. p.205 above), but (of course) not embracing the traditional martial functions of Kalki:

at the beginning of *satya yuga*, the age of truth, the great rishis and wise men will incarnate from the highest level and build the kingdom of wisdom on earth... When I descend to earth... *satya yuga* will again blossom with me. I will build the kingdom of true *dharma*, without battle or war and people will follow me in love. The whole cosmos is in Me — I am the Universe.

The reference here is to what Indira Chowdhury-Sengupta (1999:19) sees as ‘the nineteenth-century myth of the ‘golden age’ of ancient Indian civilization’. She posits its roots to be in the early ‘Orientalist approach to India as the site of an ancient civilization’, but of course it also resonates with the traditional *Yuga* theory, and we have already encountered it in the 18th century figure of Vīra Brahmam (see p.269). Nevertheless, it did perhaps become more prominent in the nineteenth century, and (under the influence of Western “New Age” ideas, such as those that we saw in the previous section) has only grown in prominence since that time. As Raychaudhuri (1999:9) notes, Vivekananda cites a variant on it in

³⁶ See, respectively, pp.220;35;335,n.31

relation to Ramakrishna: ‘The *satyayuga*, the age of truth, dawned the day he was born. All divisiveness ended from that day.... He was the one who would resolve all conflicts’, and we have seen that Sathya Sai Baba similarly portrays himself as ushering in a “Golden Age” (p.205). Similarly, but in more general terms, it is said of the modern avatar Adigalar (of whom I will say more later): ‘When an incarnation comes, a tidal wave of spirituality breaks upon the world, and people feel spirituality almost full in the air’³⁷, and Sathya Sai Baba parallels this understanding too—he sees the (supposed) fact that: ‘Enthusiasm to progress in the spiritual field and earn mental peace thereby is on the increase’ as ‘evidence of the Grace that the *Avathaar* sheds’³⁸.

Returning briefly to Mahaprabhuji, I would note that, over and above whatever specific *siddhis* may be attributed to him, he is also claimed to be omniscient and omnipresent³⁹. Interestingly, *advaita* sentiments come to the fore in this last regard—and, moreover, he is portrayed as equating himself with traditional avatars in a manner highly reminiscent of what we have seen of Sathya Sai Baba (e.g. p.256 above): ‘I am everywhere.... Wherever you are, I am with you. Sai Nath [i.e. Shirdi Sai Baba], Mahaprabhuji, Rama, Krishna, are all one. The *atma* is one and eternal’. More so than Sathya Sai Baba, Mahaprabhuji’s general demeanor and persona, as portrayed in Madhavananda’s account, is highly reminiscent of that attributed (in various hagiographical accounts) to Shirdi Sai Baba—that of an eccentric (and aged) saint who casually wields incredible magical powers. Mahaprabhuji is thus another candidate for membership of the “Sai Baba Movement” postulated by White.

Shepherd, in line with his views cited earlier (Section 2.1), takes great offence at ‘the blanket term of “Sai Baba movement” imposed by undiscerning Western academics’, but mainly, it would seem, in order that the memory of the figures included in this category should not be tarnished by association with what he sees as Sathya Sai Baba’s many wrongdoings. Whilst generally disagreeing with Shepherd’s criticisms, I have not made much use of the idea of a “Sai Baba movement”,

³⁷ <http://www.omsakthi.org/writings/avatar3.html> [20-2-2007]

³⁸ Sathya Sai Baba (29-7-1969) S9 22:115

³⁹ NB We saw something earlier (p.232) of Sathya Sai Baba’s claims to omniscience, and I might add here that he similarly claims to be omnipresent: ‘I am everywhere, watching everything and aware of everything’ [(22-11-1970) S10 35:232]—something that the traditional avatars also claim (e.g. *Bhagavad-Gītā* 10:16; see also e.g. Singh (1979), p.248). He even claims “omnipotence” [E.g. (17-12-1964) S4 49:286]—or possession of all *śaktis* (powers) [(10-1961) S2 22:114]—something that is similarly averred of Kṛṣṇa in *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 4:11.30 (see Singh (1979), p.265).

however, in the context of this section, in which I am explicitly comparing Sathya Sai Baba to other similar figures, I ought to give it some consideration. Rigopoulos (1993:247,249), who we saw to have picked up on this theme, proffers three other figures, Narayana Baba (still alive), Basheer Baba (1942-80?) and Meher Baba (1894-1969), for consideration in this regard, and concludes that the movement ‘may indeed be classified as one of the major religious phenomena of neo-Hinduism’. But, according to Rigopoulos, Narayana Baba makes no claim to avatar status—holding, rather, that the ‘disembodied soul of his dead guru (that is, Sai Baba)’ guides him and enables him to materialize objects at will; whereas Basheer Baba, whilst claiming to incarnate Shirdi Sai Baba, ‘acquired some powers (*siddhis*), which, however, he lost due to his greed for wealth’. In this respect, there is little similarity between the two. Moreover, both exhibit little overall similarity to Sathya Sai Baba—certainly not in terms of popularity and following, indeed: ‘After Basheer’s death, his movement seems to have dissolved’. I have already referred a couple of times to Meher Baba, who is much more similar to Sathya Sai Baba in this regard, and will return to him shortly, but, from what we have seen, it would seem that Shepherd is right in asserting that the homogeneity of the “Sai Baba movement” has been overstated.

Nevertheless, at least in the case of Shirdi Sai Baba himself, there is (in addition to what we saw earlier) at least one other significant parallel that can be drawn with Sathya Sai Baba. Gunaji (1996:63)—author of the English “adaptation” of the *Shri Sai Satcharita* (to which I referred earlier, p.89), an authorized hagiographical account of Shirdi Sai Baba⁴⁰—writes that the ‘in-describable Shakti or Power of God, known as Pure Existence, Knowledge and Bliss incarnated in the form of Sai in Shirdi’, recalling Sathya Sai Baba’s similar proclamation that we encountered at the head of Section 3.1 above. Indeed since, as noted earlier, Sathya Sai Baba was evidently well aware from childhood of the contents of the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, we might see this as an instance of direct influence.

Other passages, however, contrast with Sathya Sai Baba’s views. Gunaji (1996: 67) goes on to draw a distinction between the role of a ‘Divine Incarnation’: ‘to protect the good and destroy the wicked’, and that of a ‘Saint’—for whom ‘the good and the wicked are the same’, and it is with this latter category that he more strongly aligns Shirdi Sai Baba (although he does say: ‘The Lord (God) dwells in

⁴⁰ Gunaji (1996:7) writes that Shirdi Sai Baba gave his blessings for this work and spoke of writing his ‘autobiography’ through the ‘instrument’ of Hemadpant, author of the original (Marathi) *Shri Sai Satcharita*.

the Saints'). Certainly, there are few recorded identifications on Shirdi Sai Baba's part with the role of avatar, the only one that I have come across being an indirect one, in which he inserts himself into the traditional list of ten avatars (and this in the place of Rāma—reflecting what Rigopoulos (1993:200) notes to be his 'predilection for this divine figure'). Rigopoulos writes that 'if such an account is true, Baba would have had awareness of himself as an *avatāra*'. But the fact that Shirdi Sai puts himself in the place of Rāma, and also, as Rigopoulos notes, includes Kalkin in the list—affirming, furthermore, the traditional view that there will be (only) one avatar in the Kali yuga—would have to cast this into doubt. More likely, I would suggest, he is again (as we saw him do earlier) simply evincing an affinity with Kabīr (for whom Rāma was the divine name of choice), and/or perhaps exhibiting a Sūfī (ecstatic) propensity for identifying with divine figures. As I have already mentioned, Marianne Warren (1997,1999) shows Shirdi Sai Baba's background to be more strongly Sūfī than Hindu, and, accordingly, Rigopoulos (1993:64) points to Shirdi Sai's occasional identifications with Allah as paralleling those of al-Hallāj (who we encountered earlier).

As Rigopoulos (1993:236) observes, Shirdi Sai Baba evidently did adhere to a belief that he would reincarnate (we saw that he claimed to be a reincarnation of Kabīr), and shortly before his death he is said to have assured several of his devotees 'we shall meet again and again'. But Rigopoulos sees this as the origin of a 'belief in a series of *avatāras* of Sai Baba', when, in fact, there is little in the way of traditional Hindu avatar theory here. Still, as Rigopoulos (1993:262) also notes, many Hindu texts, including (significantly in light of what we have seen) the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, the *Gurucharitra*, the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, the *Yogavāsishṭha*, and the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, 'had large circulation in Shirdi and ...many of Sai's *bhaktas* [devotees] studied them daily'. And it was primarily these texts, and these devotees who shaped Shirdi Sai Baba's dominant (Hindu) posthumous persona. Srinivas (1999a:245-246)—much as we saw her suggest in regard to Sathya Sai Baba's persona—sees a progression in Shirdi Sai Baba's identity:

the holy mendicant/saint (*fakir/sant*) paradigm was associated historically with non-urban locations; the paradigm of the spiritual guide (*guru*) and, in later years, the incarnation (*avatar*), is to be found associated with suburban and urban sites.

Srinivas (1999a:259,n1) does not, however, provide any details of Shirdi Sai Baba's avatar persona—referring the reader, rather, to her work on Sathya Sai Baba, in which, however, she similarly has little to say on this matter. But there is no de-

nying the influence that Shirdi Sai Baba's (predominantly) posthumously acquired status as an avatar must have impacted upon Sathya Sai Baba, both via the latter's knowledge of the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, and through other popular Hinduised accounts⁴¹. The results of this, we have already seen—from Sathya Sai Baba's early attempts to imitate the posture of Shirdi Sai Baba⁴², to his materializations of *vibhūti* (see p.87), to his specific avatar claim (see pp.97ff.).

As I mentioned above, of the other members of the “Sai Baba Movement”, only Meher Baba bears much resemblance to Sathya Sai Baba, and even then there is a great deal of difference. Sathya Sai Baba himself certainly does not accord Meher Baba avatar status—taking exception, especially, to a prolonged vow of silence that Meher Baba undertook. Whilst, publicly (as we saw in the introduction to this chapter) he discourages any derision of Meher Baba's claims to divinity—privately, when he was ‘asked if Meher Baba was an Avatar’, he is said to have responded: ‘Meher Baba was a joker. He lost his voice in an automobile accident. Is this *mauna* (silence)?’⁴³ And the fact that Meher Baba continued to communicate during his “silence” by means of an alphabet board, similarly attracted Sathya Sai Baba's derision as being unworthy of the designation *maunam*, (sacred) silence.

As we have often seen to be the case with his references to modern figures, Sathya Sai Baba partly has the facts wrong—Meher Baba maintained “silence” for almost twenty years even before the first of two serious motor-vehicle accidents⁴⁴. But Sathya Sai Baba's point is to assert his charismatic authority—in this case invoking both the sense of: “It is said that Meher Baba took a vow of silence, but I say unto you that this was not so”, and “one jot or one Tittle shall in no wise pass from the law (which prescribes *absolute* and *voluntary* silence)”. And, despite Sathya Sai Baba's views on this issue, Meher Baba does present a few parallels to Sathya Sai Baba in that he is a self-proclaimed avatar figure. Whilst Srinivas (1999a:250) notes that, for the most part, only Shirdi Sai Baba's ‘Sufi character is preserved’ in the figure of Meher Baba, this does not seem to preclude some explicit avatar claims on his part. Thus, for example, Meher Baba, like Sathya Sai Baba (e.g., p.198 above), holds that ‘we are all *Avatārs*’, and qualifies this by say-

⁴¹ See, e.g., Rigopoulos (1993), p.25.

⁴² See p.96 above. NB In early times, Sathya Sai Baba also mimicked the eating habits of Shirdi Sai Baba (LIMF 209), and as Rigopoulos (1993:21ff.) notes, he later narrated two lengthy accounts of Shirdi Sai Baba's early life, albeit “hinduizing” the same, presenting him as an avatar of Śiva.

⁴³ GC 83

⁴⁴ Purdom (1964), p.406ff.

ing: ‘I know I am the *Avatār* in every sense of the word, and that each one of you is an *Avatār* in one sense or another’⁴⁵.

But Srinivas is right in that Hindu imagery is minimal in Meher Baba’s persona. In addition to strong Sūfī elements, Christian portrayals of Jesus, especially the elements of wrongful conviction and suffering, loom large in Meher Baba’s proclamations. Shepherd (2005:142) cites him as saying, for example, ‘I continue to come as the Avatar, to be judged time and again by humanity in its ignorance’. Moreover, Meher Baba’s identifications of himself as an avatar are interspersed with a number of other titles by which he refers to himself—such as: ‘Christ, Buddha, Rasool, the Ancient One, the Perfect One, the Messiah’⁴⁶. His identification of himself as avatar comes across as little more than an occasional poetic variation upon these. Certainly, it is not developed by him to anywhere near the extent that we find in the case of Sathya Sai Baba. And he seems unsure of the importance of his divine status, discoursing upon the ultimate irrelevance of his identity as: ‘Highest of the High’⁴⁷. In direct contrast to this, Sathya Sai Baba, when confronted by one of his disciples with the idea that ‘it matters very little whether Sai is the Avatar or not’ gave the following strong attestation to the contrary: ‘Don’t doubt about the Avatar as Swami’⁴⁸.

I would note here what Daniel Gold (2005:220-221) posits to be two types of contemporary ‘great gurus—the *mahagurus*’:

those taken to be basically an exceptionally wise human being, a respected teacher of age-old traditions’, and those ‘considered first of all to be an instance of the embodied divine, somehow superhuman and distinct from ordinary mortals. ...For the respected human teacher, it is primarily the guru’s religious culture that mediates the divine, but for the divine embodiment, it is sooner the guru’s person itself....

Gold seems unaware that this is analogous to the distinction between “traditional” and “charismatic” authority in Weber’s terms (as outlined earlier, p.77), but, appropriately (given what we have seen of Sathya Sai Baba), Gold gives Sathya Sai Baba as an example of the second of these “types of *mahāguru*” (i.e. a charismatic figure). And it is important to note that, as he points out, and as we have very much seen: ‘Inevitably, the two categories... overlap’—Sathya Sai Baba often uses the avatar idea itself to lend traditional authority to his teachings and persona.

⁴⁵ Purdom (1964), p.392, cf. Sathya Sai Baba’s claim: ‘There is really no difference between the *Avatars* and yourselves except with regard to the number of aspects’ [*kalās*] (cited p.228 above).

⁴⁶ Bassuk (1987b, p.85)

⁴⁷ See Shepherd (1988), p.49 (citing Purdom (1964), pp.210ff.)

⁴⁸ C XLIV 120

Interestingly, Gold—noting the fact that ‘for a time Osho/Rajneesh took the honorific Bhagwan, normally reserved for a divine incarnation’—goes on to say: ‘Not coincidentally, I think, these two have also been among the *mahagurus* most embroiled in public scandals: Strong assertions may go hand in hand with wide licence’. Whilst Urban (2003b:242,174) notes that Rajneesh (1931-1990) soon came to ‘reject his former Hindu title, Bhagwan, which had asserted his divine, god-man status’, and insinuated that it was a ‘joke’ (on his part) to have ever accepted this title, this itself is perhaps a reflection of the libertine attitude of Rajneesh—a deliberate device to encourage his disciples toward his goal of the ‘explicit rejection of all traditions, doctrines and values’. And we saw earlier that Sathya Sai Baba also—albeit much more subtly—sometimes undermines his avatar identity, or at least uses this to lead his followers towards understandings of *advaita*.

Gold goes on to comment upon another important contemporary *mahāguru*, one who we also encountered earlier, aligning her with the first of the above-positing types—i.e. as drawing more upon traditional authority:

Although Ammachi [1953-], like Sai Baba, is also spoken of as an incarnation of the divine, less controversy surrounds her. The claims made about her embodying the divine mother are usually taken in very broad terms and carry little explicit sense of exclusivity.

Still, the claims *are* made, at least by her devotees, and the appeal of Ammachi is perhaps (as I suggested earlier) multifactorial. Selva Raj (2005:132), to whom Gold is referring, writes, for example, that:

Ammachi has dual conflated roles and identities as simultaneously guru and goddess. While many of her devotees privilege her identity as the Divine Mother, others prefer to stress her essential nature as the perfect human guru who inspires and facilitates their god-realization.

Similarly, Maya Warrior (2003:215) notes that whilst: ‘According to popular belief, Mata Amritanandamayi [Ammachi] is an avatar-guru, a divine incarnation who has descended to the earth in order to fulfil a divinely ordained mission’, ‘In her self-representations she appears as a spiritually enlightened individual who has dedicated her life to the alleviation of humanity’s suffering’. And it is this “self-representation” that perhaps presents the major contrast between her (and, as we have seen, between most other modern avatar figures) and Sathya Sai Baba.

Yet another modern Indian avatar of note is Babaji, most famously described by Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952)—himself regarded as an avatar, but making little if anything of this identification. Bassuk (1987b:134) writes that: ‘According

to Yogananda, ‘Babaji is the Avatarin, meaning the progenitor of a lineage of Avatars, and this lineage stems from the God Shiva, not Vishnu...’. This might be seen as a potential parallel with the case of Sathya Sai Baba, but the idea of the *avatārin* derives from traditional (North Indian) Vaiṣṇava theology⁴⁹, and is not one to which Sathya Sai Baba refers. And there is little else that he and Babaji have in common. In Yogananda’s depiction (and Western appropriations of it, i.e. in the “Rebirthing” movement), Babaji is thousands of years old—an exemplar of the possibility of physical immortality—and, in Sathya Sai Baba’s eyes, this seems to count against his claim to avatar status. He was asked immediately after the above-cited question about Meher Baba being an avatar: ‘What about Babaji, the one mentioned in Yogananda’s book?’ And he replied: ‘Nobody lives forever in this physical body. After twenty-one days in samadhi, the body will drop away’⁵⁰.

We might imagine that he would be similarly dismissive of the self-made claims to avatar status of two recent figures from Andhra Pradesh, Bhagavan (1949-) and his wife, ‘an embodiment of Shakti, the feminine divine power’, Amma (1954-), for, as we saw earlier (p.325), Sathya Sai Baba rejects the practice of *śaktipāt* (the transfer (by touch) of spiritual power from *guru*/avatar to disciple)—a practice akin to what these two figures claim to offer. A devotee writes that ‘Sri Bhagavan and Amma are one being in two bodies and both of them can transfer the state of Oneness to any amount of people’, a transfer which occurs, as Bhagavan describes it, ‘through the process of what is called ‘deeksha’ [“initiation”], an electrical energy which transfers through some kind of a hole in the mind of man’⁵¹.

Like that of Babaji, the personae of these two figures have evidently become entangled with Western “New Age” beliefs and aspirations, with Bhagavan (who seems to act as something of a spokesperson for Amma also) predicting ‘a wave of mass enlightenment over a three day period in 2012’⁵², and proclaiming that ‘an entirely new species [of human being] is emerging’⁵³. Certainly, other than the odd reference to the *yuga* theory, there is little reminiscent of traditional Hindu avatar ideas to be found in Bhagavan’s proclamations—he seems to adhere more to

⁴⁹ See Kinsley (1979), p.103.

⁵⁰ GC 83

⁵¹ NB This is a modernized tantric take on traditional *dīkṣā* (on which, see Gonda (1965), pp.315ff.).

⁵² Sri Bhagavan goes on to say: ‘the earth’s magnetic field... in the year 2012... will become zero for a few days. ...This would be a fresh beginning for man or the dawn of the Golden Age’—cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012#Apocalyptic_predictions [6-3-2007].

⁵³ NB This is an idea that harks back to the Theosophical Society—the views of Blavatsky and others—see, e.g., <http://www.defendingsteiner.com/misconceptions/r-race.php> [27-2-2007]

a definition of the avatar akin to that which we saw presented by Ramakrishna:

An avatar is someone who comes with a specific mission on the planet and who is divinely inspired, and through whom divine energies flow. Avatars can come in every field of human activity. Many seem to think it is can only pertain to spiritual work, but it isn't so. But I happen to be a spiritual avatar.

And there are perhaps also echoes here of a concept which Aurobindo extrapolated from the *Bhagavad-Gītā* of “*Vibhūtis*”—persons empowered by the divine to achieve greatness in various fields of activity. But, for Aurobindo (1970:151), ‘the Vibhuti is not the Avatar’, and this (in its basic sense, not in the specific use of the term *vibhūti*) we have seen to be Sathya Sai Baba’s view also.

Nevertheless, like Sathya Sai Baba, Bhagavan sometimes proclaims that there is ‘no basic fundamental difference’ between himself and ordinary persons, and looks forward to an *advaita*-like dissolution of distinctions between religions:

We cannot talk in terms of races and nationalities, or I can't say I'm a Hindu, I'm a Christian, and I'm a Muslim. ...all these things that divide man will just disappear. All these things will just drop off. There will be no need for these things. All these divisions will not exist.

Bhagavan also, again like Sathya Sai Baba, situates himself in continuity with Jesus, albeit without the same emphasis upon subordinating and/or transcendent inclusivism that we saw in Sathya Sai Baba’s views. He coordinates his mission with that of Jesus: ‘this is the continuation of that work that Christ left behind... true Christianity, as Christ intended it to be’⁵⁴.

Even more like Sathya Sai Baba, especially in terms of the complexity and traditionality of his avatar persona—is Arulthiru Bangaru Adigalar (1942-) of Tamil Nadu, who is cast by his followers as the: ‘Reinstater of Dharma, the Embodiment of all Dharmas, the Incarnation of the age, the Greatest of all Incarnations’, and as presenting a ‘Universal Religion ...whose sun shines upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners alike. It is not Brahminic or Buddhistic, Christian or Mohammedan, but the sum total of all these’⁵⁵. Adigalar’s divine status is presented in terms of Śākta appropriations of classical Vaiṣṇava avatar theory (such as are found especially in the *Devī-Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* (c.11th -16th c. CE)):

Whenever virtue subsides and wickedness prevails; whenever there is unrighteousness or Adharma and whenever there is catastrophe and unrest in the world; the Divine Mother manifests Herself. That is, Adhiparasakthi comes down to this earth, or physical plane, to establish virtue and Dharma and to destroy the evil and save the

⁵⁴ http://www.bhagavandharma.org/Thus_Spake_Bhagavan.htm [6-4-2006].

⁵⁵ <http://www.omsakthi.org/writings/avatar4.html> [20-2-2007]

good. When She comes down to the physical plane She takes human form and is called an Avatar or Incarnation.

In this respect—albeit via different traditions than those to which Sathya Sai Baba refers—he presents a strong parallel cast to Sathya Sai Baba.

There also are strains of *advaita* in Adigalar’s persona—he is called: ‘The Supreme Brahman’, and we are told that:

From their very birth, the Avatars are knowers of Brahman, the Divine Mother. It should be noted that there is no difference at all between Brahman and the knower of Brahman, “He who knows the Brahman becomes the Brahman” - Mundaka Upanisad [cf. p.311 above]. The Atman or Brahman cannot be known by the mind because it is itself the knower. Therefore, man’s relative knowledge reaches only up to Avatars, who are always established in Atman or Brahman. The highest ideal of Adhiparasakthi that the human mind can perceive or grasp is the Avatar.

But this does not extend to the possibility of Adigalar followers becoming avatars:

a living entity, however great he may be in the material estimation, can never equal the Supreme Mother. Anyone who is a constant companion of the Divine Mother is certainly a liberated person but he cannot be equal to the Divine Mother.

Interestingly, this type of viewpoint, which Sathya Sai Baba too sometimes expresses (although he does, as we have seen, allow for the possibility of his devotees “becoming Sai Baba”), seems especially to encourage the idea that the avatar only *appears* to be human:

They assume human form and human limitations for a particular period of time in order to teach us. In reality they are never limited. They are ever free but appear to be limited to the eyes of ordinary human beings.⁵⁶

And, indeed, we will encounter a number of similar views of Adigalar’s persona in Section 6.2 below—in which I will focus upon this type of thinking.

There are other contemporary figures who might be compared to Sathya Sai Baba in more general ways—messianic figures from non-Hindu religious backgrounds. I referred earlier (p.32,n.39) to the charismatic American Christian leader José Luis de Jesús Miranda (b.1946), who consciously presents himself as the “Second Coming of Christ”, and would note here that he has a Russian counterpart in Grigori Grabovoi (b.1963), who similarly proclaimed himself: “Jesus Christ in second coming”, and even ‘promised to resurrect the children slain during the Beslan school siege’⁵⁷. He also has a Siberian counterpart in “Vissarion” (b.1961)—who ‘commands a following of thousands and rules over a large swath

⁵⁶ <http://www.omsakthi.org/writings/avatar3.html> [20-2-2007]

⁵⁷ <http://english.pravda.ru/russia/history/79228-1/> [8-7-2007]

of the Siberian mountains'⁵⁸. Then there is Ryuho Okawa (b.1956) of Japan, who claims to be a rebirth of the Buddha (and of Hermes, cf. p.332 above) and who has gathered a sizeable international following⁵⁹. And there are no doubt a number of other similar figures, “Self declared messiahs”⁶⁰ of one sort or another. But, in terms of ideas of the avatar⁶¹—or even of any comparably profuse “autotheology” (that is, theology which presents one’s self as God)—none of these figures much resemble what we have seen of the case of Sathya Sai Baba.

The persona of the popular American guru ‘Adi Da’ (1939-) is more promising. He certainly identifies himself as an avatar—even, for a time, affixing this word to his name—but his use of the idea of the avatar is sporadic. He calls himself:

The Divinely Descended one, The “Bright” Divine Person Who Pervades The cosmic domain From Infinitely Above, and Who Is The Very and inherently “Bright” Divine Self-Condition, and The Self-Existing and Self-Radiant-Source-Condition, Of All and all, and Who Is appearing, Perfectly Divinely Self-“Emerged”, In The Avataric Form Of A Man, For the Sake Of the Graceful Divine Liberation Of All and All.⁶²

Much that we have seen of the idea of the avatar is present here, and something of the style of this is reminiscent of what we have seen of Sathya Sai Baba’s proclamations (e.g. p.235), but, so far as I am aware, Adi Da expands little upon the meaning of his avatar persona *per se*—especially in terms of traditional avatar ideas—and indeed has little else at all, outside of a few scattered invocatory references, to say about the matter⁶³. This, again, is a major contrast with Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar identity—of which we have already seen a great deal, and will see yet more in the next, and final, chapter.

⁵⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,3604,721088,00.html> [8-7-2007]

⁵⁹ See, e.g. http://www.irhheurope.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=12&Itemid=26 [8-7-2007]

⁶⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Self-declared_messiahs [8-7-2007]

⁶¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_people_who_have_been_considered_avatars [8-7-2007]

⁶² Carolyn Lee, *The Promised God-Man is Here* (Middletown, The Dawn Horse Press, 1998), p.812.

⁶³ On some key aspects of the life and cult of Adi Da (a.k.a. Da Free John etc.), see Kripal (2005).

6. DISCUSSION OF A DESCENT

Truth is something which everyone has to respect under all conditions.
Truth cannot be changed by arguments, by comments or by discussions.¹

There is nothing quite so redundant as a “discussion” chapter in a thesis that consists almost entirely of discussion. And, from Sathya Sai Baba’s perspective too, for the very different reason of the transcendent unchanging nature of the advaitic “Truth”, discussion is of little use. But this chapter will at least give me a chance to recap what we have seen, and to expand upon or uncover a few more aspects of my material—especially some that require me to draw upon the full range of chronological periods and thematic concerns that I covered in previous chapters.

As I noted at the beginning of the last chapter, Sathya Sai Baba’s claims to be unique—he says, for example: ‘My course is unique, different from all that you know’². But, whilst we have seen that he is often innovative, and that his claim to be “the avatar” is unusual in the extent to which he develops it, we have seen little about him that cannot be understood in the light of some traditional precedent or modern parallel. What then are we to make of such a claim? Is this just a case of psychopathological “boasting and illusions about his true characteristics” (cf. p.53)? We have seen little that can be really dismissed as such; most often, upon investigation, his statements prove to have a basis in non-dualistic (advaitic) theology, and this is no exception—he follows on immediately to say: ‘I do not identify Myself with anything’. Sathya Sai Baba, rather than simply claiming to be special, is again using his divine persona to present a traditional spiritual ideal.

An extended example of this will serve to recap the essence of much of what we have seen in this study. Portraying himself as unique, Sathya Sai Baba says:

No *Avathaara* has done like this before, going among the people, the masses, the millions, and counselling them, guiding them, consoling them, uplifting them, directing them along the path of *Sathya*, *Dharma*, *Shaanthi* and *Prema*....³

The last four terms here constitute what is perhaps the most prominent “signature line” for Sathya Sai Baba, both recalling and surpassing what we saw in regard to his similar use of “*satyam*, *śivam*, *sundaram*” (p.236). As in that case, he portrays himself as not merely a teacher of these ideals, but as their very embodiment—they are “interiorized” (see p.157) within him (and other avatars):

¹ Sathya Sai Baba SSB 1977 46

² Sathya Sai Baba (10-1961) S2 22:112

³ Sathya Sai Baba (30-9-1965) S5 42:233

Raama came as the embodiment of *Sathya*, *Dharma* and *Shaanthi* (truth, virtue and peace); Krishna came as the personification of *Prema* (Love); now, the Embodiment of all the Four is needed, for, at the present time, knowledge has increased beyond the capacity of character [(10-1961) S2 22:113].

This also exemplifies “coordinating subordinating inclusivism” (see 4.4); Sathya Sai Baba coordinates and subordinates previous avatars as but aspects of a “comprehensive context” that is provided only by himself as the avatar of the present age. Another similar example emphasizes his propensity for “ethicization”:

Raama was the representative of *Sathyam*, Krishna of *Prema*, Buddha of *Dharma*. Now it is of all the four, *Sathya*, *Dharma*, *Shaanthi* and *Prema*. *Sathya* is the *Dharma*, *Prema* gives *Shaanthi*. I command you: never hate others, or wish evil to them or talk ill of them. Then only can you attain *shaanthatwarupam*.⁴

He moves from proclaiming himself to be the embodiment of four spiritual values to exhorting his devotees to practice the ethical implications of the same (cf. pp.73-361 above). And, in yet another example, he makes a transition that we saw to be typical of his employment of *arthavāda* passages—the four values constitute a “reversible structure” indicating the ultimate unity of deity and devotee (pp.161ff.):

the *Rama Avatar* fostered *Sathya* and *Dharma* and the *Krishna Avatar* fostered *Santhi* and *Prema*. But in this Age of *Kali*, God has given the necessary strength to every human being to foster all the five [*sic*] values.... Man need not wait for God to foster these values. He has been endowed with the strength to do the same.⁵

Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar identity recedes into the background as he urges his devotees to themselves take up an avatar-like role, and other passages complete this transition, furthermore typifying his “transcendent inclusivism” in depicting an “ascent” towards the and non-dual *ātmā* (cf. p.254 above):

When man realises the inefficiency of the senses, the mind and the intellect, to grapple with the Reality and know the inner core of his truth, then, he discovers he is the *Aathma* which is *Sathya*, *Dharma*, *Shaanthi* and *Prema*.⁶

All the values are interrelated. For example, a burning electric lamp, can be compared to *Prema*. For the lamp of love to burn, there should be a bulb. That bulb is *Santhi*. The bulb had to be connected to an electric wire. That wire is *Dharma*. And then the current has to flow in the wire. The current is *Sathya*. With the current of *Sathya* (Truth) flowing in the wire of *Dharma* (Righteous conduct), connected to the bulb of *Santhi* (Peace), the lamp of *Prema* (love) burns and sheds its light. *Sathya*, *Dharma*, *Santhi* and *Prema* constitute a single whole and not separate values.⁷

⁴ Sathya Sai Baba (29-9-1960) S1 30:188

⁵ (26-09-2000) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume33/sss33-16.pdf> [12-7-2007]

⁶ (7-1967) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume07/ssso7-28.pdf> [12-7-2007]

⁷ (10-2-1990) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume23/sss23-03.pdf> [13-7-2007]

This last passage also exemplifies what we have seen to be his generally “traditionalist” ethos, as he “finds the traditional in the modern” (see pp.318ff. above). Yet another passage invoking these terms recalls what we saw of his religious universalism, again exhibiting transcendent inclusivism—in which all religions are ultimately the one “Eternal Religion” (see Section 4.4):

Wherever *sathya*, *dharma*, *shaanthi* and *prema* are emphasised, in whatever religion or language, by whichever teacher wherever he may be, there we have *Sanaathana Dharma*.⁸

Then there is an explicit appeal to “traditional authority” (see pp.77ff. above) for these ideals, as he speaks of:

the ancient ideals of *Sathya*, *Dharma*, *Shaanthi* and *Prema*, ideals that are delineated in the Vedhas, described in Shaasthras, illustrated in the epics, practised by countless generations of the men and women of this land and confirmed as best suited for individual and social progress by its saints and sages, law-givers and leaders....⁹

Sathya Sai Baba also invokes these ideals in exercising his “charismatic authority” over traditional iconographic depictions of Śiva:

The Bull on which Shiva is said to ride is not the animal called by that name, but the symbol of *Dharma* or Righteousness which has the four legs, *sathya*, *dharma*, *shaanthi* and *prema*. ...Prefer the meaning that elevates and you will always be right.¹⁰

He states here his preference for the “moral of the story” over its details (p.51), and further exhibits an “identification through resemblance” (*four* values resemble *four* legs, see pp.155ff.). Furthermore, despite the obvious inconsistencies in some of the above, all of these passages can be seen as generating “rational authority” for Sathya Sai Baba’s discourse—they lend it a “technical” air (see pp.229ff.).

All of the above could further be considered to be “innovations” (see p.75) on Sathya Sai Baba’s part, but we have seen that most of them have a strong presence in the history of avatar traditions in general, and an observation of Smith (1989:217), albeit made in a different context, seems appropriate here: ‘Hinduism might then be considered a *process* of innovation through traditionalization’. He writes of what he sees as ‘the necessary obsession to constitute as “derivative” Hindu texts, practices, and institutions, and to connect them to Vedic originals (this text is really the Veda, this practice is really a sacrifice, etc.)’, concluding that: ‘The Veda and the sacrifice function as categorical prototypes for all subsequent texts, practices, and institutions’. But, to this last list, we must surely now add the

⁸ (24-3-1958) ref

⁹ (22-7-1968) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volumeo8/ssso8-26.pdf> [10-5-2007]

¹⁰ (7-10-1962). 47.

avatar, for, whilst we have seen that it is partly derived from these other two, we have also seen that it sometimes itself serves as such a prototype. Indeed, as we saw earlier, in addition to simply legitimating his avatar identity through reference to the Vedas, or performance of vedic sacrifices, Sathya Sai Baba sometimes legitimates his ‘protection of *vedhic* culture’ (p.244) by tying this to his avatar persona. To use just the last sequence of passages that I quoted from Sathya Sai Baba as a further example, we saw him asserting that his “signature line” of four values are *really* characteristic of the avatar (despite the fact that “no previous avatar” has embodied these), and that his devotees *really* ought to themselves take on the role of the avatar—having been “given the strength” (i.e., perhaps, like the *śaktyāveśa* avatars mentioned earlier, p.224) to do so. In this last regard, we should perhaps also add to Smith’s list the *ātmā*—the *real* identity of the devotee, subsuming the four values, which are *really* “a single whole, and not separate values”. The (epic) conception of *sanātana dharma*—the *real* nature of “other” religious traditions would be another likely candidate.

Smith (1989:221-222) writes that:

Hindu doctrine and practice are presented as the already asserted, the already believed, the already done... Hindus have, from the outsider’s point of view, been engaged in the reformatinal work of revising the category [of the Vedas] in light of new particulars in need of connection. The particulars, in this case, are the ever-changing detritus of history: new teachings on the nature of the universe, the place of human beings in it [etc.].

And, whilst we have seen Sathya Sai Baba making proclamations of what he himself states to have “never occurred before”, I have suggested that his avatar persona “traditionalizes” this (and/or is an ideal locus for “oppositional charisma”, see p.233); we have seen that he uses the “ever changing detritus of history” (including “modernity”) simply as a vocabulary upon which he is able to draw to express his avatar persona. His “innovations” in this regard, as I have highlighted above, can certainly be seen as a ‘modality of tradition’ (see p.75); he is, as I concluded in Chapter 5 above, ultimately a traditionalist, rather than a “Neo-Hindu”. The ambivalent scholarly characterizations of him that we saw in Section 3.4 in this regard, can thus be understood—and dismissed.

It remains, however, for me to discuss more fully some of the scholarly analyses of the avatar traditions that we have encountered. This I will endeavour to do in the first two sections of this chapter. After that, in the third section of this chapter, I will (again) discuss my study as a whole, and present my final conclusions.

6.1 Analyses of the Avatars

Because of worldly desires, we classify, fragment and we divide.
The mistake lies in the individual. God is everywhere.¹

From the point of view of Sathya Sai Baba's non-dualistic theology, any form of analysis is fundamentally flawed. It is, he says, only because of "worldly desires" that we seek to divide and classify phenomena. We will see at the head of the next section that he himself claims to be free of such desires, but we will also see that, in so claiming, he posits a gulf between himself and "human" beings. I, certainly, despite my best attempts at academic detachment, cannot claim the same for myself. This, then, has been my analysis of Sathya Sai Baba (and of other avatar phenomena as they relate to him) based upon my desire for understanding of the same. I have divided my material into rough chronological and/or thematic groupings and have sought to interpret it by variously considering its function, its antecedents, and the means by which it has undergone changes over time.

I have also drawn upon other scholarly analyses—especially those of Parrinder, Bassuk, Weber, Smith, Hacker and Halbfass—treating both of the avatars and of more general phenomena. As I suggested earlier, however, the only real "universal" of the avatar traditions (including modern variants) is the concept of a specific "mission" or purpose that each avatar comes to fulfil. I noted various scholarly testimonies to this effect, and might add another here—in regard to Ramakrishna (whose "purpose" I noted above, p.303), Raychaudhuri (1998:4) writes: 'In the Indian tradition every incarnation has a particular purpose'. Further support for this comes from a (Tamil influenced) avatar tradition cited in relation to Adigalar: 'The Avatar comes to this world with a particular mission which is the main objective of the Avatar called Avatara Nokkam'². We have not come across anything that would contradict this, and whilst we have also not come across anything else that might be construed as a "universal" of avatar ideas, there are a number of general themes (and/or "mythemes", and especially Parrinder's "characteristics") that I have hinted at but not fully explored. These, I can at least discuss hereunder.

Parrinder sees a characteristic of the avatar traditions in that: '*The example and character of the Avatars is important*', and I would note that Swallow (1982: 129,n13) similarly casts Sathya Sai Baba (in Weberian terms) as an 'exemplary, not an ethical prophet'. For Weber, as Talcott Parsons (1963:xxxv) writes:

¹ (20-7-1996) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/d960720.html> [12-7-2007]

² <http://www.omsakthi.org/writings/avatar3.html> [20-2-2007]

The exemplary prophet provides a model for a way of life which can be followed by others, embodying in a religious sense what is defined as a higher level of personal virtue. There is, however, no implication that the standards of this pattern or “way” are binding on any social community as such. The ethical prophet, on the other hand, imposes demands on certain categories of men in such a way that not only do they have an opportunity, but it is rather their *duty* to follow his precepts. These precepts in turn are defined, not so much to exhort followers to emulate the prophet’s personal example, as they are to exhort them to conform with an impersonally defined normative order.

The distinction here is between prophets wielding primarily charismatic and primarily traditional (and/or legal) authority respectively, and whilst, as we have seen, and will further see shortly, Sathya Sai Baba and other (traditional and modern) avatars certainly do embody the first of these modes of prophecy, the second mode too is of some significance to understanding them.

Indeed, a significant portion of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* portrays Kṛṣṇa as praising impersonal, scripturally-defined “duty” (*svadharma*), and Sathya Sai Baba similarly proclaims that “Duty is God”³ and often informs his followers at length of what he sees as their duty. This is partially covered by Parrinder’s (1970:125) tenth characteristic of the avatar doctrines: ‘*The Avatar is a guarantee of divine revelation*’, and, whilst Parrinder’s description of this evinces the influence of his Christian theological background, it does make some valid points:

The Avatars give revelations of God. They are ‘special revelations’, which are both divine teaching and the self-manifestation of the divine to human persons. Yet they do not deny that there is some knowledge of God already.... Arjuna tells Krishna that he believes him to be true, first because Krishna has revealed the truth, then because all the sages have testified to him, and finally because he himself perceives that it is true. Therefore Arjuna accepted Krishna as divine because this fitted in with, or at least did not contradict, his previous ideas about the nature of God and his revelation to man.

The last two sentences of this passage paraphrase *Bhagavad-Gītā* 10:13,14, and also accord well with what we have seen of Sathya Sai Baba’s descriptions of his self-manifestation of/as the divine—we have much seen him announcing that he is the avatar, we have seen that he draws on the authority of contemporary sages (Aurobindo, Messing) to support this claim, and we have seen that he attests to the possibility of the direct perception of his avatarhood by devotees (those who, like Aurobindo and Messing, are “aware of the *ātmā* within”). And, of course, we have seen throughout this study that his portrayal of himself as an avatar very much re-

³ See, e.g., (21-4-1967) S7 18:94.

lies upon previous religious traditions.

Regarding the idea of ‘self-manifestation’ as “revelation”, I would note some observations that Werner H. Kelber (1987:111) makes of Jesus in this respect:

One of the most characteristic forms of speech in John’s gospel is the *ego eimi* [“I am”] saying. ...Jesus employs the self-authenticating formula, “I am the Light of the World” (8:12), “I am the Good Shepherd” (10:11), “I am the Bread of Life” (6:35, 48), “I am the Resurrection and the Life” (11:25)... One may presume here a classic oral principle in operation according to which the speaker of words is as important as the message he delivers. In a comparable, though extravagant sense, Jesus the speaker of words of revelation acquires the status of revelation himself. ...In the ancient Near Eastern and Hellenistic world, gods and goddesses, or their prophetic spokespersons, manifested themselves by way of *ego eimi* language.

We have much seen Sathya Sai Baba making “I am” claims: “I am Sai Baba” (p.97); “I am Siva Sakti” (p.107); “I am SAKALA DEVATA SWAROOPA” (p.320); “I am God” (p.312); “I am Kṛṣṇa” (p.117); “I am (the various attributes of the) *ātmā*” (p.235), and such claims have a long history in Indian tradition—Chapter 10 of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* contains more “I am” (*aham, asmi*) statements than are to be found in any other religious work of which I am aware. The charismatic force of these as “self-authenticating formulae” is only too obvious. Sathya Sai Baba literally acts as a theophany, a manifestation of God, to his devotees, and sometimes he seeks to draw rational authority for this by using traditional “technical” terms—claiming that ‘the greatest gain’ possible from ‘the experience the Avatar confers’ is to ‘experience the *swabhaava* (nature) and the *swaruupa* (form) of the Lord’⁴. Kumarappa (1933:312) notes the theory that ‘the Deity incarnates Himself for the sake of showing Himself as it were to His devotee’, and quotes some views of Rāmānuja to the effect that the avatar embodies both the essential ‘nature’ and secondary (but ‘wonderful’) ‘qualities’ of the Godhead (to which Rāmānuja, in his commentary on the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, applies the terms ‘*svarūpa*’ and ‘*svabhāva*’⁵) and this would seem to accord with the force of Sathya Sai Baba’s reference here. Over and above this, of course, we have seen that Sathya Sai Baba makes some use of the traditional *viśvarūpa* form of “self-manifestation”.

And he does, also, very much present the avatar as a source of ‘divine teaching’ and ‘revelation’. Parrinder goes on from the above to write:

It is clear that in the many kinds of Hindu scriptures man can have some knowledge of God apart from the Avatars. This might be called ‘general revelation’, though in

⁴ Sathya Sai Baba (9-10-1964) S4 30:172

⁵ http://www.hinduweb.org/home/dharma_and_philosophy/vvh/vvhfund2.htm [12-7-2006]

scripture, and not only in nature and conscience. Because there was this ‘general revelation’, the ‘special revelation’ of the Avatars became possible.

And, interestingly, even this etic theological distinction finds a parallel in Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings:

Man is but an instrument in God’s hands; his plans can win through only when they are in line with His. And, what are His plans? His commands? They are declared in the scriptures, which are revelations of His plan made to the purified intellects of saints. They are also declared by His *Avathaaras*, who appear in human form so that they may speak to men in their own language to win their confidence and lead them and teach them [(4-10-1965) S5 46:256].

In this sense then, both Sathya Sai Baba and the traditional avatars act as “ethical prophets”—teaching in accord with traditional/legal authority of “the scriptures”.

But, as Sathya Sai Baba puts it here, the avatars also “lead” their devotees—they act as “exemplary prophets”, and, accordingly—whatever accusations to the contrary may have been levelled at him—Sathya Sai Baba proclaims:

I do not stray, despite the fact that I am aware of all that is and was and will be, despite My knowledge of all that is enveloped in Time and Space. ...For, whosoever finds himself in positions high or takes up the reins of leadership has to walk straight and steady, so that all who follow may do likewise.⁶

Or, again:

There is none to question Me if I do not act; there is nothing I would lose if I do not engage in activity. Nor have I any great urge to be acting. But, yet, you see Me very active. The reason is I must be doing something all the time, for your sake, as an example [(24-9-1968) S8 35:196].

And he even explicitly claims that a major purpose of the avatar is ‘leading an exemplary life’⁷, and that he acts to set an example of proper ‘humility and reverence’ in the performance of ordinary activities⁸. This is also implicit in a claim he makes that ‘*Avathaars* (divine incarnations) make their advent with certain resolves’—citing some traditional and popular characterizations of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, and setting forth his own moral manifesto: ‘The foot that is put forward will not retreat. I will not go back on the word that I have given. I only give and do not receive’⁹. And most other recent *guru*/avatar figures are similar in this respect—McDaniel (1989:246) notes that contemporary Vaiṣṇavas expect such figures ‘to be

⁶ http://f5.grp.yahoofs.com/v1/YDlBQ39iInl_rjWuzRZ9KPiFXqF11dZqkt_AULouXNCuVbeKaKfA6toCNWWxJ2bNaorOXwoNvUkgbmQjum1t/Swami%27s%2odeclarations%2oabout%2oHis%2oDivinity.doc [3-5-2007]

⁷ SSB 1978 55

⁸ (16-8-1987) <http://www.ssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume20/ss20-18.pdf> [3-5-2007]

⁹ Sathya Sai Baba (13-7-1984) S17 14:91-93

primarily role models', and R. Neufeldt (1993:172) notes that Aurobindo strongly promotes the idea of 'the *avatāra* as exemplar'.

Similarly, of the traditional avatars, Parrinder (1970:123,226) writes:

in considering the character of Krishna the dominance of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* must be remembered, and here Krishna is noble, moral, active and compassionate.

Rāma affords even more patterns of conduct in nobility, affection and long-suffering. Both he and Krishna are examples of virtuous life.

Indeed, as he later notes, Kṛṣṇa 'is required to do nothing, and has nothing unattained to gain, yet he continues to work to sustain the universe and to give an example of work to others' (a paraphrase of *Bhagavad-Gītā* 3:22-24). Sathya Sai Baba is evidently drawing upon this ideal in the two passages cited above.

But Parrinder fails to note (anywhere in his study) the important fact (to which I alluded earlier) that the Kṛṣṇa of the *Mahābhārata* is famed for his moral expediency—especially in repeatedly instructing his allies to lie and cheat in the interests of victory in battle. It is true that this fact does not come through much in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, but Parrinder's claim regarding the 'dominance' of this work is overstated—whilst it is certainly true for the modern philosophically-minded exponents of Hinduism (Radhakrishnan, Aurobindo), it does not hold good for many of the more devotionally-minded *Vaiṣṇava* groups. For these, the more fantastical, mischief-mongering, womanising (yet transcendent) Kṛṣṇa of the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* is more important. Thus, contrary to Parrinder's characterisation, recognition of the avatars' conduct as other than exemplary does have a major place in tradition—indeed, *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 10:33.27-33 describes how Kṛṣṇa, who had 'incarnated here to establish Dharma' could 'act in direct contravention of it' (in particular, committing "adultery" with the *gopīs*)—giving the following disclaimer:

The words of the possessors of divine wisdom and might [*īśvarāṇām*] are always correct and authoritative, but not necessarily so their acts.... Such authoritative persons who are devoid of ego (*ahamkāra*) have no selfish ends to serve by virtuous behaviour or have no stakes to lose by acting to the contrary.¹⁰

Here, the avatars are cast as ethical, rather than exemplary prophets.

Some modern Indian avatar figures too, adhere to this type of understanding. Meher Baba, for example, bluntly states: 'Do what I tell you, not what I do'¹¹—presumably with reference to behaviour, on his part, such as the following:

he is constantly changing his plans. He makes promises and does not keep them; he

¹⁰ Tagare (1978), Part IV, p.1463 (Citation from *Bhagavān Dās* (1962), pp.58-59).

¹¹ Purdom (1964), p.431.

gives instructions and contradicts them; and what he proposes is not carried out... His rule is to observe no rule.¹²

And all of this could be said of Sathya Sai Baba. Babb (1986:186) writes that: ‘He is perceived as mercurial, and prone to sudden and inexplicable changes of demeanor and pace’, and Sathya Sai Baba evidently encourages such perceptions in his devotees, saying of himself, for example, that he ‘appears quickly in a moment and vanishes equally quickly, then suddenly comes into your presence’¹³, or invoking his status as “God” in order to deflect doubts that his devotees (in particular his students) may have about some of his behaviour:

There is no creature that can impose limitations or constraints on God. God is utterly selfless. All His actions are sacred whether it seems pleasant or unpleasant to you.¹⁴

Accordingly, Babb (1987:174) writes that it is ‘not that his behavior is amoral, but that the morality it expresses is in certain critical ways beyond the limited capacities of human understanding’, concluding (contrary to Swallow) that ‘Sathya Sai Baba is not a moral exemplar’.

Another point added by Babb—that Sathya Sai Baba is ‘not a householder’, and hence ‘to live as he does would be a clear dereliction of duty for most people’—does not, however, seem to accord so well with the facts. I have not come across any instance of Sathya Sai Baba himself making this point—in fact, the opposite seems to be true, as he says:

I am a man amongst men. When they see me I appear as a man. Among women I am a woman. Among children I am a child. When I am alone I am God. This is the Truth about Me. The reason is I have to act towards each section at their level.... To householders I teach the duties of householders. I teach people what is appropriate for them. What for do I do all this? So that they may learn from Swami.¹⁵

But what *is* clear from the above passages, is that in instances in which Sathya Sai Baba and Kṛṣṇa do not function as exemplars, the issue is their accountability or otherwise for actions that may appear to overstep the canons of traditional morality, and this is something that Babb (1986:186) elsewhere does pick up on: ‘within the tradition in which Sathya Sai Baba operates, unaccountability is an extremely important characteristic of divinity’. McDaniel (1989:248) expands upon why this seems to be the case (at least with the figures in her study):

¹² Purdom (1964), p.433-434.

¹³ Sathya Sai Baba (on himself) SSB 1974 II:16 276

¹⁴ (23-11-1999) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume32/sss32p2-16.pdf> [16-5-2007]

¹⁵ (31-7-1996) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume29/sss29-31.pdf> [16-5-2007]

While it is easy to violate the canons of proper behavior, it is more difficult to violate myth. The scope of mythic and religious imagery in India is so broad that there is scarcely a behaviour for which a mythical precedent could not be found.... The only limit on the ecstatic guru's behavior may be his or his disciples' knowledge of myth.

And Sathya Sai Baba, as we have seen, knows *a lot* of myth¹⁶. Babb is thus perhaps half right, as is Parrinder in his characterisation, and, to put a twist on the wording of Parrinder's characteristic, we might conclude by saying that, both traditionally and for Sathya Sai Baba, sometimes the example and character of the avatar is important, and sometimes it is important that it not be important.

To put this in Weber's terms, we would have to say that sometimes the avatar acts as an "exemplary prophet", and sometimes as an "ethical prophet" (even if only in adducing scriptural justifications for less than exemplary moral behaviour). But the very category of prophet is problematic in its application to Sathya Sai Baba, for, as Parsons (1963:xxxiii) puts it, in Weber's conception: 'The prophet is above all the agent of the process of breakthrough to a higher, in the sense of more rationalized and systematized, cultural order'. Sathya Sai Baba's teachings, as we have seen, whilst presenting some significant rationalizations of earlier ideas, are anything but systematized. Similarly, as Parsons (1963:xxxv) notes, Weber explicitly 'cites the Hindu *guru* as a pre-eminent example of the religious teacher who implements an established order rather than breaking with it'. And, whilst we have seen that Sathya Sai Baba does sometimes refute traditional ideas, he is certainly not proposing any explicit break with an "established order" (if this concept has any meaning in "Hinduism").

Sathya Sai Baba thus embodies some elements of Weber's prophetic type, but other crucial elements are missing. He also seems to portray elements of a type that Weber (1956:54) calls the 'mystagogue', in that he 'performs sacraments, i.e., magical actions that contain the boons of salvation'. We have seen this especially in his "materializing" *vibhūti* and *liṅgams*—both of which are believed by his followers to grant "salvation" or "liberation" (see p.89,n.12 and p.173 respectively). And, indeed, Weber does associate this type with Indian *gurus* in general¹⁷. One of Parsons' (1963:xxxv) comments on this type also seems to fit what we have seen of Sathya Sai Baba: 'He is not an agent of rationalization, but of escape from the

¹⁶ NB Sathya Sai Baba's disciples too contribute in this regard—especially in legitimating Sathya Sai Baba's sexual "abuse" (e.g. <http://www.saibaba-aclearview.com/contents1.html> [21-6-2007]).

¹⁷ NB Weber is referring more to ritual than "magic" as such, but those amongst Sathya Sai Baba's "miracles" that are portrayed as being more salvifically inclined usually occur in strongly ritual (festive) contexts. His "materializing" of *amṛt* is another example of this (see (24-11-1961) S2 26:141).

problems of meaning which exert pressure to rationalize'. We saw suggestions that "problems" of this kind are indeed prominent in the socio-cultural milieu from which large numbers of Sathya Sai Baba's followers come—and, whilst we saw that there were other, and more important, factors involved in his popularity with the modernizing middle-classes, I cited an explicit suggestion by Sharma (1983:384) that: 'The Sai Baba movement... enables them to resolve the tensions not rationally but mythologically'.

Parrinder's (1970:121) third characteristic of the avatars: '*The lives of Avatars mingle divine and human*', also raises some interesting points in relation to Sathya Sai Baba, who also sees something akin to this as intrinsic to the avatars:

Avatar = God + Man. He behaves like He knows nothing and devotees get misled, seeing His unassuming nature. People concentrate on His human qualities, while forgetting the Divine ones. That is why they are surprised when they see occasional miracles.¹⁸

Traditionally also, as we saw in Section 3.4, the life of Rāma especially accords with this characterization, and I will have more to say of this shortly, focusing especially on some of the later versions of the Rāma story, upon which I only touched earlier, and in which the "theological tension" here is highlighted.

Firstly, I would note that Sathya Sai Baba draws upon this idea to lend traditional authority to the fact that, in his present avatar, he attended school like an ordinary child. In the context of recalling his schooldays, he says:

Rama sat at the feet of Vasishta and attended class with other boys. Krishna, too, had Sandeepa as his guru, while Sudama and others were his classmates. When the formless, attributeless Divine Principle takes human form and appears among men, It has to conduct Itself as an agreeable companion and as an understandable example to contemporaries [Sathyam-4 5].

The avatar acts as an exemplar, but there does also seem to be some recognition that the idea of an avatar receiving spiritual teaching is somewhat counterintuitive. I would note that Madhavananda (1998:44) similarly finds it necessary to adduce the examples of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa to justify Mahāprabhuji's having a guru, and that some lengthy justifications seem to be required in regard to the spiritual practices of Caitanya and Ramakrishna¹⁹. And even traditionally (in some works at least) this "human" aspect of the avatars is minimized. Kṛṣṇa is said to have learned the

¹⁸ (21-5-1995) http://xb.xoom.it/_XOOM/Esonet/encyclopedia/SaiBaba/Articoli/daTradurre/register/d95my21.htm [1-9-2001]

¹⁹ See, e.g.: 'Krishna as a bhaktha' (Prabhupāda, 1976), and: 'The Divine Incarnation as a Sādhaka' (Saradananda (1978), p.87ff.). Other modern figures too see this as an issue (McDaniel, 1989, 259).

Veda from his teacher Sandīpani, however this is done with extraordinary prowess (see e.g. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 3:3.2), and Parrinder (1970:67)—citing the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Tulsī Dās—notes that ‘Rāma... went to study under a teacher, but this was a good jest, for his natural breath was the four Vedas’.

Parrinder (1970:68) goes on to write that, in this work, Rāma is said to have: exhibited ‘all sorts of illusory feats’ like a showman. He let himself be bound for a time in battle. But can he, ‘the omnipresent home of the universe, be brought into bondage?’

And, it is such understandings of the “human” characteristics of the avatar that predominate in Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings on Rāma. He says for example:

many *rishis* of the forest worshipped Rama as Lord Narayana. But Rama said, “Am I Narayana? I did not know that. As far as I know, I’m only Rama, the son of Dasharatha. Please don’t embarrass me.” Seeing His acting, even some sages were deceived!²⁰

Some traditional interpretations of the incident to which Sathya Sai Baba refers here do not so strongly give the sense that Rāma is merely “acting”. Brockington (1998:468,n47), cites Raghavan (1976:10), to the effect that:

After the accomplishment of the killing of Ravana, the gods praise Rama as God incarnate. “No,” tells Rama to them, “I am a man. I am an ordinary man, Rama son of Dasaratha” (*Aatmaanam maanusham manye Raama Dasarathaatmajam*). For his mission is to show the ordinary man that it is possible for him to be pure, good, truthful.... All this should be made possible for the ordinary man and none should think that only a superman or God’s incarnation can acquire these virtues.

But, even here, it is not suggested that Rāma is an ordinary human being. And Sathya Sai Baba, certainly, portrays the moral of this passage as being that the avatar is understood to be *the avatar*, not a human being, for: ‘This humanness of the Avatar is false’. As he elsewhere puts it, discussing some of the human behaviour of the avatar: ‘we should not be misled into the belief that It [the avatar] is just human and nothing more’ [(24-7-1983) S16 16:88-89].

From the above, then, we might see two main reasons behind these views on the issue of the avatars’ “mingling human and divine”: the avatar must appear to be human so as to act as an exemplar, but must not be understood to be merely human—for then it would lose its identity as *the avatar*. This is in line with what we saw earlier to be necessary for the creation of “oppositional charisma” (cf. p.233), but there are other factors too. Firstly, in accordance with Pollock’s obser-

²⁰ (21-5-1995) http://xb.xoom.it/_XOOM/Esonet/encyclopedia/SaiBaba/Articoli/daTradurre/register/d95my21.htm [1-9-2001]

vation on the liminal nature avatars in general (cited earlier, p.185), it is important to the plot of the *Rāmāyaṇa* that Rāma, at least, should be human in form and behaviour. Only this will counteract the demon Rāvaṇa's divinely given immunity from death by all other classes of beings. Accordingly, rather than having Rāma respond in a sagely manner to Rāvaṇa's abduction of his wife, the *Adhyātma-Rāmāyaṇa* (see p.249 above) has him think:

If I quietly sit in my hut in a detached mood, how will these trillions of demons get wiped out? Lamenting in separation from the wife like the common folk, I shall roam about to find her, and meet Rāvaṇa, the king of the demons. I will annihilate him along with his entire tribe.... I have descended as a man. Therefore, I should stay on the earth behaving as such.²¹

The last point here presumably alludes to the traditional notion of *svadharma* ("individual duty")—all beings, it is believed, ought to behave in accordance with the *svadharma* appropriate to their birth²², in this case, birth in a human form. But there are theological issues here too; Aurobindo (1958:409) writes that:

The Avatar is not supposed to act in a non-human way — he takes up human action and uses human methods.... If he did not his taking a human body would have no meaning and would be of no use to anybody. He could just as well have stayed above and done things from there.

And Sathya Sai Baba presents a variation upon this type of understanding:

God assumes a role in the drama of the world in human form. He has to behave as a human being only. This should be clearly understood... For every incarnation there are certain rules and regulations [(19-09-1993) San (11-1993) 297].

A third reason given for the apparent human characteristics of Rāma is to spiritually benefit his devotees—by releasing them from curses to which they had been subjected (e.g. *Adhyātma-Rāmāyaṇa* 3:7.12-15), and Sathya Sai Baba sometimes utilizes an interiorized take on this type of reasoning, saying of his present avatar:

It has now assumed human form and can be expected to have human traits and even human failings, for, It has to deal with human frailties and rescue man from himself [(18-12-1970) S10 38:251].

There does, then, seem to be much justification for Parrinder's assertion that: "*The lives of Avatars mingle divine and human*", but we should note that this is presumably based upon Christian theological assertions that Jesus was fully God and fully human (Parrinder (1970:223) sees most of his avatar traits as being applicable to Jesus), whereas the "human" dimensions of the avatars seem to be a func-

²¹ C.L.Dhody, *The Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* (1995), p.96.

²² See Doniger (1978). Doniger even notes that there is a "*svadharma* for demons".

tion of their divinity—serving didactic and/or salvific purposes—God “acting” human, rather than being human.

In this connection it is interesting to note that avatar concepts were from early times associated with the theatre. Couture (2001: 319), in his recent study of the term “*avatāra*”, writes that:

In theatrical language, the word *avataraṇa* (or the verb *avatī*) is a precise technical term used to describe that movement performed by actors who move from the stage wings onto the stage itself.

Couture (2001:324,n7) notes that ‘the dramatic performance (*nāṭya*) is said to descend from heaven to earth because of an ancient curse’—recalling a major traditional motif associated with the avatars (echoed, as we have seen, in Sathya Sai Baba’s personal mythology). There is thus, as Couture (2001:323) goes on to say, an ‘extended *śleṣa* (or double entendre)’ in some accounts of the avatars:

Not only does Viṣṇu descend upon the earth (*avataraṇa*) to remove its burden (*bhārāvatarāṇa*), but he is also a *naṭa* or a *raṅgāvatāraka* [actor] who dons the most unexpected disguises.

And, as we will see shortly, theatrical connotations are certainly prominent in the avatar traditions and in Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar teachings.

Of course, the *Nāṭya-Śāstra* (“Treatise on Performance”), to which Couture refers in making the above connection, dates to about the 2nd century CE, by which time several more-or-less fully-formed avatar myths were already flourishing, so it is not the case that there is anything intrinsically theatrical about the avatars—other associations, such as that implied by the term *bhārāvatarāṇa* (mentioned above by Couture), are also important (see p.136 above). And, whilst theatrical imagery attaches to some of the traditional auxiliary “technical” terms associated with the avatars—their actions are said to be *līlā*, ‘(stage) play’, and their very embodiment is said to take place through *māyā*, ‘(a magician’s) illusion’—we saw that the term *māyā*, as it occurs in mythological contexts that prefigure its association with the avatars, connotes “power” more than illusion.

Nevertheless, theatrical metaphors abound in the avatar traditions. We have already encountered the concept of *līlā* in the context of discussing Sathya Sai Baba’s persona (see pp.45,216), and Matchett (2001:146) expands upon Couture’s observations—writing of Kṛṣṇa that parts of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* focus on:

showing his life as a performance, accompanied by celestial musicians and presented before a celestial audience.... so that Kṛṣṇa could almost be said to be ‘on stage’ throughout Book 10. He has already been compared to an actor in Book 1.... He shows to Brahmā his ‘performance as a child belonging to a herder family’.... When

he has allowed Akrūra to see his divine form, he withdraws it, ‘as an actor [concludes] his performance.... What Kṛṣṇa is performing is an ‘imitation of human life’.

As Matchett indicates, *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 1:15.35 describes Kṛṣṇa being ‘like an actor on the stage’²³, and Sathya Sai Baba echoes something of this sentiment—albeit in his “global avatar” context—portraying himself as an ‘actor on the world stage’ who is ‘biding for the proper time to play his full role’²⁴. He also draws out the theological significance of such metaphors: ‘Really speaking, this *Avathaar* is itself acting a part. It is ‘putting on’ a function and ‘assuming’ a role, by the Function-less and the Role-less’²⁵.

All of this raises questions as to how “real” the “role” “put on” by the avatar is understood to be—and despite the “reality” implied by early uses of the term *māyā* (as just noted), in later traditions (as we also have seen) it very much does come to have the sense of “illusion”. *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 10:14.16 even explicitly says of Kṛṣṇa: ‘It is here only in this your incarnation (as Kṛṣṇa) that you have clearly demonstrated the illusory nature [*māyātvam*] of this entire external universe ...Oh dispeller of *Māyā*’²⁶, and this bodes poorly for Parrinder’s ninth avatar characteristic: ‘*The Avatar shows some reality in the world*’. More to this effect, Sathya Sai Baba likens the world to a dream, and finds it necessary to “explain”, via a modern analogy, the reason for his acting human in an unreal world:

If the dream is realised as such, then the world is done away with. Swami helps those caught in the dream.... A big scientist may know that a child’s world is a dream and has no reality which is lasting. But this does not prevent him from sitting down with the child at the child’s level [MBI 221].

Moreover, he indicates that, for him (for theological reasons) the “mingling” of human and divine in his avatar is ultimately unreal:

Some ignorant people commenting on Me say that I have a double personality, Daivathwam or Divinity most of the time but Manushyathwam or Humanity the rest of the time. But, have faith in this, I am ever and always, of the ‘thwam’ of the ‘ity’ only. God does not change or get transformed.²⁷

In this understanding, the avatar is not *really* an *avatar* at all—this flies in the face of the “paradoxical” *Bhagavad-Gītā* verse that I discussed in Chapter 3 (pp.202ff.), which holds that “though Kṛṣṇa is unchanging, yet he takes birth and creates a

²³ Anand, S., *The Way of Love: The Bhāgavata doctrine of Bhakti* (New Delhi, 1996), p.53.

²⁴ Sathya Sai Baba (23-11-1994) S27 31:267

²⁵ Sathya Sai Baba (4-10-1962) S2 43:248

²⁶ Tagare (1978), Part IV, p.1344.

²⁷ Sathyam-1(15)213

body for himself". Here, we perhaps have a more strictly philosophical interpretation of identity—in line with Sathya Sai Baba's strong identification with (advaitic conceptions of) the unchanging *ātman*, the spiritual absolute.

It is interesting to reflect in this connection upon Parrinder's fifth characteristic of the avatars: '*There may be historicity in some Avatars*', for in Sathya Sai Baba's identity (as just described) there would seem to be little room for such considerations—and, indeed, as we have seen, he tends to pay little attention to any (potentially) historical details of the avatar traditions to which he refers. More generally speaking also, it has often been said that questions of historicity were/are not much a part of the traditional Indian consciousness, and this is certainly true in some contexts—Hardy (1993:182) notes 'the readiness of the Purāṇic tradition to transform its own premises constantly and not to insist on some absolute, objective account of the past'. However, the validity of this view as applied to "Indian consciousness" as a whole is rejected by Parrinder²⁸, and has been challenged especially strongly in more recent times²⁹. Parrinder (1970:122) writes that:

The animal Avatars are mythical.... They are important for cosmology. The Tortoise supported the earth, the Boar delivered it from floods, and the Fish saved mankind.... Krishna is a complex figure.... Yet his family and clan are named, and the sacred sites at Mathurā and Brindāban are cherished for their many historical associations... Rāma's genealogy, from his father Daśaratha back to the primordial Manu, and his city of Ayodhyā, are remembered and held as real.... Few people doubt that Gautama Buddha ...really lived on earth. The same applies even more forcibly to other saints now commonly regarded as Avatars.

Furthermore, as we have seen, there is much in the way of traditional (and modern) proclamations on the precise number of avatars and on the manner in which they fit into various chronological and typological schemes.

Nevertheless, as a passage I cited earlier (p.34) from Padmanaban indicates, there is to this day some popular ambivalence in this regard—at least in spiritual circles³⁰, and the views of several of the major modern Indian avatar figures that we have encountered exemplify this. Thus, Ramakrishna (nd:215) says:

Think not that Rama and Sita, Krishna and Radha, are mere allegories and not historical personages, or that the scriptures are true only in their inner or esoteric meaning. Nay, they were human beings of flesh and blood ...but because they were divinities, their lives can be interpreted both historically and allegorically.

²⁸ See, e.g., Parrinder (1970:122).

²⁹ See, especially, Narayana Rao, Shulman, Subrahmanyam (2001); Sharma (2003).

³⁰ NB Halbfass (1988:349-350) notes this in the ideas of some modern Indian scholars too.

Meher Baba even dismisses historicity as ‘immaterial and insignificant when Eternity and Reality are under consideration’³¹, and Aurobindo (1958:428) writes:

There is, it seems to me, a cardinal error in the modern insistence on the biographical and historical, that is to say the external factuality of the Avatar... What matters is the spiritual Reality, the Power, the Influence that come with him.

However, Aurobindo, like Ramakrishna, concludes that: ‘The historicity of Krishna is of less spiritual importance and is not essential, but it still has a considerable value’³², and this more or less summarises the attitude that we saw embodied in the teachings of Sathya Sai Baba (see p.189 above). The avatars may be “historical”, but that is not what is most important about them.

Interestingly, Sheth (2002:110), writing on the philosophy of traditional avatar ideas, points to a distinction between “real” and “historical” in this context:

A historical being is subject to time. Hence, for theists, God, as such, is real but not historical. Non-Hindus may consider some *avatāras* as mythical and look upon others such as Rāma or Kṛṣṇa, or especially Gautama Buddha, as well as several others, as historical. However, whatever secular history may have to say of these “historical” beings, for the Vaisnavite theologian they are all real but not historical; that is, they are not subject to imperfections such as time, hunger, thirst, and so forth.... In fact, to ask whether Kṛṣṇa is historical is a meaningless question for the Vaisnavite: it is impossible for an *avatāra* to be historical.³³ According to the Vaisnavites the *avatāras* really manifest themselves at definite times and places and really perform various deeds, but not all their actions can be taken at face value. For instance ...Kṛṣṇa’s death is explained away.

Explaining away Kṛṣṇa’s death, however, is not to suggest that his earthly career had no end, nor that such an end did not come at a specific time in history. Indeed, various modern and traditional Hindu works (including those of Sathya Sai Baba) make a point of assigning a definite date to Kṛṣṇa’s passing (3102 BCE)—seeing this as the beginning point of the current world “epoch” (the Kali Yuga). Sheth seems to be conflating here the concept of ‘historicity’ with the concept of “real humanity”—which, as we have seen in this section, often does not apply to the avatars. I will have more to say about this, and about the “death” of the avatars, in the next section.

³¹ Purdom (1964), p.396.

³² Aurobindo (1970), Vol.1, p.425

³³ NB See also Romila Thapar (1998), p.273.

6.2 Keeping up Appearances

Do not equate this body with human bodies. It is only the appearance of a form for the sake of the devotees. ...There are no desires. This body is just an appearance of form.¹

I hinted towards the end of in the last section that there are issues in my material that reflect upon some more of Parrinder's (1970:12off.) "characteristics" of the avatars, and I will follow this up here. Parrinder holds that: '1. *In Hindu belief the Avatar is real....* 2. *The human Avatars take worldly birth....* 3. *The lives of Avatars mingle devine [sic] and human....* 4. *The Avatars finally die....* 9. *The Avatar shows some reality in the world*'. And all of these reflect upon an issue that (Christian) scholars tend to discuss under the heading of 'Docetism', a term given to a group of early Christian heresies which variously held: 'that Christ had no real material body and human nature, but only an apparent body, a phantasm of humanity'; that Jesus did not really suffer; or that his 'acceptance of the ordinary laws that govern our life, his eating, drinking, birth, and death are so many illusions'². The term 'Docetism' (Gr. *dokein* = "to seem") has a complex history³, into which I will not delve too deeply, noting only that it is also sometimes applied to an important strain of Buddhist thought⁴.

Parrinder rejects the assertions of some scholars that the avatar traditions are docetic in character, and the five characteristics just listed encapsulate his position on this. We saw earlier, however, that there is a strong sense in which some of the major avatar traditions emphasize the "other-worldly" nature of the birth of the avatars (see p.223 above). Sathya Sai Baba himself narrates a very much "otherworldly" story of his own conception (in terms that echo his mother's recollections of the same, which were expressed in his presence many years earlier⁵):

Prior to the birth of the child, a very significant incident took place. Puttaparthi, was then a tiny hamlet. In the centre there was a well from which people would draw water. One day Easwaramma was fetching water from the well. All of a sudden she saw a white luminous light, emerging like lightning from the sky, entering her

¹ Sathya Sai Baba (15-1-1983) MBI 217. NB He has at least some traditional precedent in making such statements—according to the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* (10:14.55;10:60.20), Kṛṣṇa, 'for the good of the world' (*jagad-dhitāya*), 'appears like one possessed of a body' (*dehīvābhāti*), and, 'has no desire for woman, children, or wealth' (*na sṛy-apatyārtha-kāmukāḥ*).

² ERE 4:832 NB The orthodox Christian line is that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human (see, e.g.: Bassuk (1987b), p.178, and Purdom (1964), p.397).

³ For a good, recent summary of this see: <http://www2.evansville.edu/ecoleweb/articles/docetism.html> [19-4-2007].

⁴ See, e.g., Parrinder, (1970), p.244ff.

⁵ See LIMF 17ff.

womb. There was a sudden gust of wind. Subbamma who came out of her house at that time saw the light entering the womb of Easwaramma. Till this day, I have not revealed this to anyone. I am disclosing this today so that you may understand the significance associated with the advent of the Avatar.⁶

This, for Sathya Sai Baba, is evidence of his avatar status, and there is a striking parallel here with a story of the conception of Ramakrishna—the most famous of modern Indian avatars. Kripal (1990:55) cites Ramakrishna’s mother as saying:

while I was talking to [my friend] Dhani in front of the Śiva temple of the Yogis, I saw a divine light come out of the great limb of Śiva, fill the temple, and rush towards me in waves like the wind... suddenly it was as if it covered me and entered into me with great force. Frozen with fear and wonder, I at one point fainted and fell to the ground.... Since then, I have thought that it is as if this light entered and dwells in my womb and that I am in the early stages of pregnancy.

Some of Sathya Sai Baba’s detractors have even suggested that the similarity of these two passages is evidence that Easwaramma was deliberately drawing upon the story of Ramakrishna to promote the idea of her son’s divinity. It is odd, however, that both women speak of fainting and falling to the ground during the event—hardly a glorious response to the entrance of a deity into the world, and a motif not paralleled in the major traditional avatar accounts. And Padmanaban (200:19) reports that ‘Vengamma (1910-), Easwaramma’s youngest sister, would remember a similar, though different account of this mystical experience’.

Nevertheless, both of these accounts do generally fit with traditional understandings, which almost invariably employ the motif of “light” in describing the birth of extraordinary figures. This motif is not restricted to Indian traditions—there is, for example, (cf. Parrinder, 1970:121) a parallel between descriptions of Krishna’s birth (e.g. *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 10:3.12) and the birth of Jesus as described in some of the apocryphal Gospels, in that both are said to have brightly illumined the rooms of their birth⁷. But it is recent Indian accounts that provide the closest parallels. Thus, Vīra Brahman is said to have been conceived after a light entered his mother’s womb⁸. Similarly, we are told of Haranath: ‘At the moment of his birth, a flash of light entered the womb of [his mother] Sundaridevi’—this, moreover, being presented as evidence that he, like Kṛṣṇa, was an avatar⁹.

⁶ (23-11-2003) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume36/sss36-20.pdf> [10-5-2007]

⁷ Tagare (1978), IV, p.1271; *The First Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ*, p.8ff. (http://mclean.jeevan.com/Infancy_Gospels/the_first_gospel_of_the_infancy_of_jesus_christ.txt [14-3-2007]).

⁸ See Velcheru Narayana Rao (1996), pp.202-203. NB On Vīra Brahman see p.269 above.

⁹ <http://kusumahara.com/Sonamukhi%20and%20His%20Marriage.htm> [20-2-2007] (The “Sundaridevi” referred to here is Haranath’s mother). NB On Haranath (1865-1927), see p.297,n.14 above.

Various explanations are given for this phenomenon¹⁰, but they commonly invoke the traditional concept of *tejas* (“effulgent energy”). Angelika Malinar (2001:108, n18) notes, for example, that in traditional accounts of the birth of the famous saint Śaṅkara, ‘the baby illuminates his cradle in the night by his own lustre (*tejas*...)’. André Couture (2001:318), writing on the history of the word “*avatāra*”, concludes that in the early Indian epic stories:

In this context, *tejas* appears to be a procreative substance which higher beings (such as gods and ascetics) possess and which gives them the capacity of occupying a womb in order to create a duplicate of themselves.

And Jarrod Whitaker (1998:137, 139), also writing on the concept of *tejas* in the epics, elaborates upon this—noting that, in traditional understandings, ‘*tejas* is inherently contained in semen’, and thus:

is the central principle involved in the process of birth.... Procreation occurs when the male’s *tejas*, being his condensed totality, is transmitted to the female, and united with her own seed or egg (*garbha*). ...the exceptional powers of fertility that those of great *tejas* possess is evident in their ability to produce offspring asexually [by which however, in the examples he gives, means without ‘an actual female’ being involved]. And furthermore, their children are exceptional mortals.

It is at least clear that Sathya Sai Baba’s otherworldly account of his origins—connecting this with his avatar-identity—is in line with traditional understandings.

More to this effect, Bassuk (1987b:99) sees a ‘PREORDAINED BIRTH’ as a “mytheme” of traditional portrayals of the avatars, writing that: ‘The paradigm for the Avatar’s birth is supplied by Krishna’—highlighting in this regard that ‘Vishnu enters the mind of Krishna’s father’, and linking this to stories of some modern Indian avatar-figures:

Chaitanya’s ...father felt a divine light enter his heart and then pass on to his wife, who saw many gods worshipping her. Ramakrishna’s father had a vision in which Vishnu informed him that he was going to be reborn, and Ramakrishna’s mother dreamt that she was being possessed by a god.

In accordance with this, Sathya Sai Baba’s mother¹¹ is presented as prefacing her above-mentioned recollections by averring: ‘I had a dream in which an angel of God (Sathyanarayana Deva) told me not to be afraid if something should happen

¹⁰ Chandaka Sri Krishna (2004:275-276) writes, for example, that Kākatīya poet Pāṅkuriki Sōmanātha (1170-1220) describes Nandīvara [Śiva] as incarnating in the form of South Indian Śaiva leader Basava—through his mother Mādām̐ba—and writes of the: ‘descent into her womb as a *kāraṇa śarīra* (causal body)... Nandīvara entered the womb of his mother like a divine spark’.

¹¹ NB Whilst this seems to be a misinterpretation on the part of the editors of the work cited here—others report that it was Sathya Sai Baba’s mother’s mother-in-law who had the dream (e.g. LIMF 17)—the effect, presenting Sathya Sai Baba’s birth as “preordained”, is much the same.

to me which depended on the will of God'¹². Furthermore, paralleling some Buddhist accounts of the origins of the Buddha, the physical process of Sathya Sai Baba's birth is portrayed by him as extraordinary—he incarnates: 'Without even an iota of pain during birth'¹³. This is far from Parrinder's "worldly" birth.

In the previous section, we saw similar problems for Parrinder's counter-docetic assertions that *the lives of Avatars mingle divine and human*, and that *the Avatar shows some reality in the world*. Indeed, Sathya Sai Baba sometimes explicitly speaks of the dual human/divine nature of the avatar in terms of "appearance":

Because the lord takes a human form, we find that He exhibits human consciousness along with Divine consciousness. Ordinary people cannot grasp the Divine aspects of an Avatar. God *appears* to be an ordinary human being to the limited intelligence.¹⁴

At the end of the last section, I also reflected upon distinctions between the "reality" and "historicity" of the avatars, suggesting that Sheth (who I cited in this context) had confused the latter of these with the idea of "real humanity", and I would add here that there are also problems with his use of the term "real". What he means is (something like) "really exist", whereas Parrinder's above cited assertion that "*the Avatar is real*", intends the term "real" in the sense of "really human" (i.e. what Sheth means by "historical") and in the sense of "having material reality". I will use the term "real" in these latter two senses—if for no other reason than that I am framing my discussion in opposition to Parrinder.

And there *are* problems with Parrinder's assertions in this regard. I cited Sheth's observation that (in much Vaiṣṇava theology) the avatars are 'not subject to imperfections such as time, hunger, thirst, and so forth', and this fact must align at least the traditions to which he is referring with the "docetic" tendencies that I have just defined. In this sense, it is not the case that '*the Avatar is real*'. Similarly, we saw Sheth point out that (in some traditions) 'Kṛṣṇa's death is explained away', and, whilst I disagreed with him that this entailed an understanding of this death as not being an "historical" event, this is simply a matter of the semantics of "historical". What is clear, is that some avatar traditions do not accord in a straightforward manner with Parrinder's broad claim that: '*The Avatars finally die*'. In this section, then, I will consider these two issues—along with the issue (upon

¹² Inside flap of *Ocean of Love* (Prashanthi Nilayam, 2000). NB As the phrase 'angel of God' (an editorial gloss, cf. ECM 20) indicates, this motif too has parallels in Christian tradition (cf. *Matthew* 1:20, in which an 'angel of the Lord' appears in a dream to the (earthly) "father" of Jesus). Another Indian parallel is found in accounts of the birth of Vira Brahmam (Narayana Rao (1996), pp.202).

¹³ http://groups.yahoo.com/group/saidevotees_worldnet/message/2036 [10-5-2007]

¹⁴ SSB 1979 49 [emphasis added]

which I but touched in the previous section) of “the avatar showing some *reality* in the world”, for, as I mentioned, all of these, in asserting “reality” over “appearance”, are defined by Parrinder in opposition to docetic views.

Sathya Sai Baba’s persona, certainly, evinces elements that we might classify as docetic. His statement at the head of this section is particularly unambiguous in this regard: ‘This body is just an appearance of form’. His devotees too, employ docetic language. Haraldsson (1997) cites an early devotee as recalling that he used to refer to Sathya Sai Baba’s occasionally reluctantly taking a bath at his behest as ‘enactment’. And, his translator, Anil Kumar, avers that: ‘Just to make others eat, just to give company to others, He pretends as if, as though, He eats’¹⁵—sentiments that Sathya Sai Baba himself sometimes also expresses (see, e.g., MBI 195). And accounts of some of the other modern Indian avatar figures evince yet other “docetic” traits; for example, David Smith (2003:178) notes that the followers of Rajneesh/Osho (who we encountered earlier) ‘say that he was never born, never died, but merely visited the planet earth for the period of his life’.

One might think this last distinction to be a somewhat trivial one, but the frequency with which such views are expressed in regard to Indian religious leaders would tend to indicate otherwise. Bassuk (1987b:134) writes, for example, of Babaji, another modern avatar who we encountered above (p.356):

He is immortal, requires no food, speaks all languages, travels on the astral plane... has the power to become invisible.... His body casts no shadow and he leaves no footprints.

Babaji certainly, does not “finally die”, and, whilst we saw Sathya Sai Baba taking issue with Babaji’s avatar status for this reason, Sathya Sai Baba himself holds that ‘God, as *Avathaar* can mould or change the body in any way He wills. He can develop it or discard it, as and when He wills’¹⁶.

And it is not just modern Indian figures who are understood in such docetic terms. Frank Keay (1931:140) notes that the followers of Kabīr ‘hold that he is without a body and only *appeared* in bodily form to men... It was not necessary... for him to eat or drink, and when his enemies tried to kill him the sword passed through his body as if through air’; *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa* 5:22.14-18 says of Krishna that he was merely ‘observing the laws of the human body... Subjecting himself to the laws of human existence... Imitating the conduct of men’¹⁷; Ānandagiri (14th cen-

¹⁵ http://groups.yahoo.com/group/saidevotees_worldnet/message/1875 [13-4-2007]

¹⁶ Sathya Sai Baba (24-7-1983) S16 16:89

¹⁷ B.C. Chatterjee, *Krishna Charitra* (Calcutta, MPBirla Foundation, 1991), pp.76-77.

tury CE, an early *advaita* commentator on the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*) describes Kṛṣṇa as taking birth “Svechha nirmithena maayaamayena Swaroopena’ (with a body moulded by His own Will and capable of deluding the World into the belief that it is human)’¹⁸; and even the *Mahābhārata* (12:326.42-43) has Kṛṣṇa say (for example) ‘you see one possessed of a form. If I wished I could destroy this form in an instant... what you see as me..., this is an illusion that I have projected’¹⁹.

Indeed, as I indicated above, the label of ‘Docetism’ has sometimes explicitly been applied to the avatar doctrines in general; it is against such attributions that Parrinder frames the “characteristics” just mentioned. We saw Parrinder’s study severely criticized by Soifer for inappropriately applying Christian ideas to the avatars, but whilst Parrinder’s ideas in this particular area are problematic, he has at least highlighted an important area for discussion. The question of the “reality” or otherwise of the avatar does occur in the Hindu traditions themselves, and with specific reference to the avatar’s birth, (divine/human) life activities, and death—the areas in which Parrinder raises it. Thus, *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 11:31.11, invoking theatrical connections (such as I noted in the previous section) says of Kṛṣṇa:

The incarnation, disappearance and the (sportive) activities among human beings (Yādavas) of the transcendental Lord are nothing but histrionics staged by dint of his Māyā Potency, like those of a theatrical performer.²⁰

The only problem with Parrinder’s “characteristics” in this regard, is that (perhaps due to his Christian background) he has attributed more significance to the “human” aspects of the avatar than do many Indian interpreters.

Indeed, other traditions, as we have seen—especially the *Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa* (see Section 3.4 above), do come closer to Parrinder’s characterization—even having the avatar at times forget his divine status and identify fully as a human being. Sheldon Pollock (1991:20) writes that Kṛṣṇa too (in the *Mahābhārata*) ‘displays an oddly “inconsistent” nature—now divine, now human’, and C.R.Deshpande (1978: 52-55;55-59) gives a lengthy list of examples of undeniably ‘human characteristics’ of Kṛṣṇa in (various recensions of) the *Mahābhārata*, and of passages which strongly emphasize Kṛṣṇa’s ‘divine character’. More generally speaking also, as Robert Goldman (1995:84) puts it:

In the Indian conception, the gods may not have the same kind of gross bodies as humans but they are by no means discarnate as witnessed by the fact that—

¹⁸ BLES (excerpted at http://sai_maa108.tripod.com/prophecy/prophecy.htm [19-4-2007])

¹⁹ Laine (1989), p.273

²⁰ Tagare (1978), Part 5, p.2120

immortal or not—they are constantly being wounded, maimed, and even killed in Hindu myths and are, if anything, depicted as having even greater fleshly desires than humans.

Parrinder's characteristics thus do tell us something about the avatar traditions—they simply fall short of encapsulating the full range of traditional accounts.

The passage just cited from Goldman lends some support to Parrinder's ninth avatar characteristic: '*The Avatar shows some reality in the world*'²¹—in particular supporting a claim by Parrinder (1970:124) in this regard that: 'The Avatars come into the world, live and suffer in it'. But Goldman is thinking predominantly of the early mythic and epic traditions, and the *Adhyātma-Rāmāyaṇa*, for example, (as indicted earlier) portrays Rāma as merely feigning suffering²². Sathya Sai Baba too maintains that even when he may 'appear to be suffering'—having taken upon himself the negative *karma* of devotees²³—there is in reality no suffering, as this is done for the sake of 'Love' and is his 'duty'²⁴. Nevertheless, there is some further justification for Parrinder's view in the fact of the predominant sense of the term *māyā* in early traditions (as mentioned above). Parrinder (1970:124) asserts that 'in the *Gītā*, *māyā* is not 'illusion', it is a divine power, by which the Avatar becomes a human person in the material world', and this does seem to be the correct interpretation of *Bhagavad-Gītā* 4:6, to which he refers (see p.202 above). Whilst *Bhagavad-Gītā* 7:25 does describe Kṛṣṇa as being 'veiled' (*samāvṛtaḥ*) by *māyā* and people as being 'deluded' (*mūḍho*) by it, Gonda (1965:173) concludes that there is no suggestion here 'that world and nature are in any sense held to be unreal: the world is not an illusion, but a source of bewilderment and delusion'.

Both of these senses of *māyā* are important, and Gonda (1965:171) explains them as arising out of two possible perspectives on the earliest uses of this term:

The complex of ideas and connotations expressed by the word *māyā* has an aspect on the side of the *māyin*- (the wielder), viz. his power, and an aspect on the side of the spectator, viz. the incomprehensibility of this power.

But Sathya Sai Baba's use of the concept of *māyā* in regard to the avatar heavily favours only the latter of these senses. He describes '*Maayaashakthi*' (lit. the "power of *māyā*") as being of the nature of a 'delusion', an attribute of ordinary

²¹ NB Again, there are also Kṛṣṇa traditions that run contrary to this characteristic—indeed. *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 10:14.16 says: 'It is here only in this your incarnation (as Kṛṣṇa) that you have clearly demonstrated the illusory nature of this entire external universe' (Tagare, 1978, Part IV, p.1344).

²² Whaling (1980), p.127; see also Sheth (2002), p.109.

²³ (24-11-1998) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume31/sss31-44.pdf> [29-3-2007]

²⁴ Sathya Sai Baba (25-12-1970) S10 39:263

humans and not of the avatar²⁵—who he says is ‘beyond’ *māyā*²⁶. And his purpose in another of his references in this context is quite the opposite of that which Parinder envisions here (“showing some reality in the world”), for he describes the individual soul (*jīva*) as just ‘appearance’, and ‘delusion’²⁷.

His other two references here are aimed at dispelling the idea that the theory of *māyā* somehow “explains” the avatar—something which would obviously conflict with his claims to “incomprehensibility” (as discussed in Section 1.3). In all of this, he betrays his alignment with the philosophy of Śaṅkara, for whom, as K. Narain (1986:278) notes, the *jīva* likewise had no independent reality, and by whom, *māyāśakti* is similarly portrayed as ‘inexplicable’²⁸ (*anirvacanīya*). Indeed, Suthren Hirst (2005:109) writes of Śaṅkara’s use of the example of a:

magician (*māyāvin*) who creates a magical illusion by his own magical powers. The same word, *māyā*, can be used for both the power and its product.... However, when Śaṅkara employs the magician example, it is notable that *māyā* always applies to the magician’s power, the means through which the magic show is created. It does not describe the effect... there is no real effect apart from the magician’s power... *māyā* is more important as an illustration than as a theory for Śaṅkara.

Māyā thus acts as an *arthavāda*—Sathya Sai Baba, in last instances mentioned above, aims to ensure that his devotees do not take it as anything more than that (ironically, much *advaita* thinking subsequent to Śaṅkara does tend to reify it).

If, in this view, even *māyā* lacks a positive ontological status, we might well wonder how “real” the avatar is believed to be—indeed, we saw that for Sathya Sai Baba (and for Śaṅkara) the avatar itself acts as an *arthavāda*—pointing beyond itself to the ultimate spiritual reality. But, as Dandekar (1979:122) writes:

A characteristic feature of the Vedānta as represented by Śaṅkara is the assumption of two main levels of reality – transcendental or absolute and phenomenal or empirical. The ultimate and the only reality is, no doubt, the *brahman* in its transcendental aspect. ...The universe may have only relative reality, but its creation had nonetheless to be explained. It is in this context that god [*sic*] is posited by Śaṅkara. In other words, god is real on the same level as the individual self and the universe.

The avatar, presumably, is as “real” as “god” (the creator of the universe). But how “real” are “the individual self and the universe”? In Section 4.3, we encountered the key Sanskrit terms that are usually employed in this context (see

²⁵ (14-02-1961) S2-1:1; (25-7-2006) <http://sathyasai.org/discour/2006/do6o226.html> [9-7-2007]

²⁶ Sathya Sai Baba (24-11-1961) S2 26:136

²⁷ Sathya Sai Baba (1-8-1956) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspspeaks/volume01/sss01-o3.pdf> [9-7-2007]

²⁸ Swami Prabhavananda & Christopher Isherwood (1970), p.49.

p.245,n.22 above), and I noted that Sathya Sai Baba sometimes uses these, but his explanation of the significance of this indicates that, for him at least, the lower level of “reality” is synonymous with “appearance”:

There are two points of view that struggle for acceptance by you---the *Pa-ramaarthika* and the *Vyavahaarika*---the spiritual and the worldly, the reality-based and the appearance-based. ...The Universe is what appears; the Reality is Divinity, *Brahmam* [(24-12-1980) S14 60:389].

In this sense, in Sathya Sai Baba’s view at least, the avatar is docetic. There is a contrast here with the views of Meher Baba, for whom ‘God’s life lived in illusion, as the *Avatār* ...is not illusory’²⁹ and is ‘simultaneously on the level of the lowest to the highest’³⁰, but Meher Baba’s views, as I noted, are Christian influenced.

And it is not only in this purely philosophical sense that the avatar is understood in docetic terms. Parrinder (1970:120) supports his characterization of the avatars as being “real” by asserting that the avatar is a ‘fleshly descent of the divine to the animal or human plane’, but this simply does not accord with some of Sathya Sai Baba’s views in this area (recall his avataric embryology, p.222)—nor with some traditional viewpoints. Even the ideas of the major traditional commentators on the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (which Parrinder much considers) are problematic in this regard. Śaṅkara writes of the avatars that their ‘birth is an illusion (*maya*). It is Divine, peculiar to *Isvara*, not of ordinary nature (*aprakṛita*)’³¹; Sharma (1986:355) notes that: ‘The Rāmānuja school regards them as essentially non-material’; and Madhva³² and most later Vaiṣṇava theologians add but a few minor elaborations to this view³³. Sheth (2002:108;121,n66) writes that Rāmānuja ‘explicitly mentions the reality (*satyatva*, *yathātmya*) of Kṛṣṇa’s birth and body’, but observes that ‘Madhva says that Viṣṇu only appears to be born’, and points out that both he and Rāmānuja mean ‘to exclude *prākṛtic* imperfections in Viṣṇu’s forms’. But, despite Rāmānuja’s terms, the effect is much the same—it is precisely such *prākṛtic* (i.e. “natural”) imperfections that Docetism seeks to deny.

Whilst Sheth adds that ‘Jiva Gosvamin of the Caitanya school asserts that the *avatāras* and their deeds are not illusions imagined through ignorance (*avidya*)’, he notes that (in this and other later Vaiṣṇava understandings):

the forms or bodies of the *avatāras* are made up of “pure matter” (*śuddha-sattva*),

²⁹ Purdom (1964), p.280.

³⁰ Purdom (1964), p.390

³¹ Mahadeva Sastry, *The Bhagavad Gita with the commentary of Sri Sankaracharya* (1979), p.122.

³² Sharma (1986), p.355.

³³ See S.K.De (1961).

which consists of six perfect or transcendental guṇas, and not ordinary, prākṛtic matter, which consists of the three imperfect guṇas. This idea of the “pure matter” (*śuddha-sattva*) seems to have had its origin in the Pañcarātra tradition.

Again, it is prākṛtic “imperfection” that is denied, and this type of view finds echoes in the understandings of some of the modern Indian avatars—Adigalar, for example, is distinguished by his followers from ordinary people by virtue of his having a ‘Sat-Chit-Ananda body... untouched by Rajas [and] Tamas’³⁴.

In a variation on this theme, *Adhyātma-Rāmāyaṇa* 7:2.67, as Whaling (1980: 170) notes, portrays Rāma as ‘intelligence alone’ (*cinmātra*), and Sathya Sai Baba employs a close synonym of this last term in presenting his own avatar views:

The Avathara is not constituted of the five elements; it is Chinmaya not Mrinmaya, spiritual not material. ...Though men may mistake an Avathara as just human, *that* does not affect the nature of the embodiment [(1969) GV 59].

But, in Sathya Sai Baba’s case, this suggests another use of the avatar as an *artha-vāda*. We must do a double-take on this passage in light of his other usages of the two key Sanskrit terms here—he indicates that, even for ordinary people, with devotion, ‘*mrinmaya* (mud-filled body) becomes *Chinmaya*’³⁵. Similarly, whilst he sometimes says that: ‘The body of the *Avathaar* is *chith* (awarenessful) substance; it is not *jada* (inert) like other materials’, he avers that: ‘Nothing is inert, inactive, *jada*’³⁶. Or, again, whilst he elsewhere asks: ‘what is beneath this sheath of body?’ (i.e. his own body) and answers: ‘Only brilliant *jyōti*’³⁷ (“light”, “effulgence”), he yet elsewhere qualifies a similar declaration by stating that ‘In fact, every being has divine effulgence within’³⁸.

As we have seen, this type of shift—using attributes once exclusively claimed for the avatar to ultimately undermine any difference between the avatar and ordinary human beings—is common in Sathya Sai Baba teachings. Indeed, it is far more important to him than (onto)logical consistency. Accordingly, contradicting what we have just seen, Sathya Sai Baba sometimes indicates that his body is composed of the five traditional material elements:

Swami’s body is human. So are all yours.... When the five elements are separated from the body, it loses its identity. Once the life has left, the body is only fit for burial or cremation, the elements fall apart into their original form. Therefore, before

³⁴ <http://www.omsakthi.org/writings/avatar3.html> [20-2-2007]

³⁵ Sathya Sai Baba (1966) S6 24:126

³⁶ SuV 44

³⁷ Sathya Sai Baba (1946-1950) SSSA 93

³⁸ (18-5-2000) <http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/d000518.html> [3-5-2007]

the body perishes, make all effort to experience the Divinity within.... Have full faith that Divinity resides in you. If you keep reminding yourself constantly that you are a part of Divinity, you are bound to become Divine yourself.³⁹

Again his avatar identity acts as an *arthavāda*—it just so happens that he chooses to express the details of this identity differently. Similarly, he elsewhere says:

you can manifest the divinity within you. But, if you cannot recognize your humanness, how can you recognize your divinity? ...You may or may not believe it. Here is my body. It has a mind, intellect etc. exactly like that of any of you. But I am aware of the workings of the monkey mind. ...I am not attached to the body or the mind. I follow the conscience.⁴⁰

This must be read in the context of one of his most common exhortations: ‘don’t follow the body or the mind, follow the conscience’⁴¹. He thus, in both passages, urges his devotees to have confidence in their own divinity and (implicitly) to follow his example in this regard—an end which could obviously be compromised by a docetic belief that he is only apparently human.

This returns us to the other major sense of “Docetism” as applied to the avatars—“apparent (rather than real) human behaviour”. Oddly (but in keeping with his preference for Christianity), Parrinder (1970:226) himself presents a somewhat docetic view of this issue:

The Avatar... ‘never becomes the seeming temporary victim of the demon powers (as did Christ nailed to the Cross), but is triumphant in his passage, from beginning to end. The Godhead, in its very aloofness, does not in the least mind assuming temporarily an active role on the phenomenal plane of ever-active Nature.’

Ironically, there are problems with this. Rāma, especially in the *Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa*, is certainly not portrayed as being ‘triumphant... from beginning to end’—his throne is usurped, his wife abducted, and he is even at one point knocked unconscious on the battlefield. And there are parallels to this in Kṛṣṇa traditions—Kṛṣṇa laments the destruction of his kinsmen and his failure to avert the *Mahābhārata* war, and he too is injured on the battlefield. Of course, docetic interpretations often undermine the force of such passages, but Parrinder wishes to deny the avatars even ‘seeming’ difficulties, and for this claim there would seem to be little justification—were it not for the fact that Sathya Sai Baba, whilst acknowledging that previous avatars underwent (seeming) difficulties, exerts his charismatic prerogative in claiming that for him, there is ‘no room for even such ‘drama’ with

³⁹ (23-11-1999) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume32/sss32p2-16.pdf> [12-7-2007]

⁴⁰ (15-2-1998) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume31/sss31-03.pdf> [12-7-2007]

⁴¹ E.g.: (3-6-1995) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeaks/volume28/sss28-16.pdf> [12-7-2007]

scenes of failures and defeats'⁴²; his 'task will go on, from victory to victory'⁴³.

Perhaps we might think that Parrinder has, after all, picked up on some general sense (or theological potential) of such an interpretation of the avatar? But, even in Sathya Sai Baba's case, appearances have often been to the contrary—with his having been bedridden for a week with a stroke (see p.107 above) and having "taken on" dozens of other "illnesses" and "accidents" (see, e.g., p.36 above) over the years. His current wheelchair-bound state is but the latest in a long line of (apparent) misfortunes. Furthermore, contrary to Parrinder's assertion that 'The Godhead ...does not in the least mind assuming temporarily an active role on the phenomenal plane', Sathya Sai Baba says: 'Some of you may imagine that it is a source of joy for the Lord to take a human form. If you are in this state, you will not feel so'⁴⁴. Given the "misfortunes" just mentioned, this is hardly surprising, and, on this note, it is perhaps meet for us to consider Parrinder's fourth characteristic of the avatars: '*The Avatars finally die*'.

This "characteristic" completes Parrinder's denial that the avatar doctrines are docetic, and seems to me to be an appropriate place for us to finish this section (and, in effect, this chapter and this study as a whole—after this, I will present my final conclusions). Parrinder (1970:121-122) writes:

Krishna was fatally wounded in the foot by an arrow from the hunter Jaras ('old age'), before ascending to heaven. Rāma walked into a river, a symbol of death. His wife Sītā descended into her mother Earth.... Death came when the purpose of the Avatar's coming was accomplished.... The end of the mortal episode must be completed, for if it is real it is only occasional.

There is truth in all of this, but, as with Parrinder's other attempts to deny that the avatars are understood in a docetic manner, there are problems here. *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 11:31.5-9 portrays Kṛṣṇa, not as dying, but merely as having 'closed his lotus eyes in *samādhi* (meditation) with a view to avoid the expected requests of the gods to visit their respective regions' before ascending to his own celestial realm⁴⁵, and at least one ancient commentator gives an even more overtly docetic interpretation—writing that the 'Lord's form, constituted of pure Sattva [i.e. *śuddha-sattva*], disappeared. His apparent form was only an outward semblance of his

⁴² (19-6-1974) <http://www.sssbpt.info/ssspeak/volume12/sss12-38.pdf> [12-7-2007]

⁴³ http://f5.grp.yahooofs.com/v1/YDlBQ39ilnl_rjWuzRZ9KPiFXqF11dZqkt_AUlouXNCuVbeKaKfA6toCNWWxJ2bNaorOXwoNvUkgbmQjum1t/Swami%27s%2odeclarations%2oabout%2oHis%2oDivinity.doc [3-5-2007]

⁴⁴ Sathya Sai Baba (26-11-1964) S4 40:239

⁴⁵ Tagare, part 5 (1978), pp.2119-2120.

real form’⁴⁶. And, even in the *Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa* (7:100.10), Rāma enters the river and is said to have “entered the effulgent supreme abode⁴⁷, body-and-all” (*viveśa vaiṣṇavam tejaḥ saśārīraḥ*). Indeed, rivers—contrary to Parrinder’s assertion—are symbolically viewed in most Hindu contexts as ‘fords’ (*tīrtha*) between heaven and earth, and thus more as symbols of ascension than death⁴⁸. Moreover, what is important in the case of Sītā is clearly not that she dies, but that she returns to her place of origin, over which she then presides as co-ruler with her mother, the Earth Goddess⁴⁹.

Furthermore, the departures of both Rāma and Kṛṣṇa are portrayed as great spectacles attended by legions of gods and men alike—who, in *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 11:31.8,10, for example, are ‘left dazed in utter astonishment’, and ‘wonderstruck’ by the event⁵⁰. Such descriptions are clearly intended portray the passing of the avatars as being of a different order from those of ordinary mortals. And Sathya Sai Baba’s views accord with the general sense of this:

Rama and Krishna did not shed their bodies in the human way. Rama stepped into river Sarayu and vanished. ...Similarly, Krishna went to Dwaraka. Uddhava saw Krishna sitting under a tree, and then Krishna suddenly disappeared. The bodies of divine incarnations will not fall in the hands of mortals.

Indeed, he goes on to draw a moral from this to the effect that his devotees: ‘are deluded into the belief that I am a human being’, further asserting: ‘Since I eat like you, play with you and sing with you, you are deluded into the belief that I am a human being like you. It is sheer ignorance to think of Me in that way.’⁵¹ Clearly, this is analogous to Docetism (as described on p.378 above). Furthermore, whilst Parrinder (1970:122) claims above in regard to the avatars that: ‘The end of the mortal episode must be completed, for if it is real it is only occasional’, we find Sathya Sai Baba denying even this—he says:

You must note that Swami’s life is in His own hands and not in those of anyone else.

⁴⁶ Tagare, part 5 (1978), p.2117. NB For some other, similar, examples see Sheth (2002), p.109.

⁴⁷ NB *vaiṣṇavam* (neuter) = ‘a partic. prodigy or omen (belonging to or occurring in the [param divam] or upper sky)’ [MW], but the narrative context here makes it clear that he has repaired to his heavenly realm, and there is obviously pun here, for *vaiṣṇava* (masculine) = “pertaining to Viṣṇu”.

⁴⁸ NB The river Styx, flowing from the world of the dead in Greek mythology, of which Parrinder is perhaps thinking, does have an analogue in some Hindu traditions—but this is not the paradigmatic river in most of these traditions, this status being accorded, rather, to the Ganges—which is believed to have descended from the heavens (and to be a gateway for a return thereto to this day).

⁴⁹ See, e.g., *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* 7:88.13.

⁵⁰ Tagare, part 5 (1978), p.2120

⁵¹ Sathya Sai Baba (17-05-2002) SSB 2002 3:48,49

If I will it, I can live for as long as I please. I can also terminate it at will. It is my will that decides and not any other person.⁵²

And in making such assertions he has at least some traditional precedents. *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 11:30.39 has Kṛṣṇa saying that his being struck by the hunter's arrow was 'exactly what was willed by me'⁵³, and *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* 7:100.10, similarly describes Rāma's ascension as "deliberate" (*vinīścīya*).

Sathya Sai Baba's speeches give few clues as to how he believes he will meet his end, but rumour in the Sathya Sai Organisation has it (upon what basis I do not know) that he will "merge" with the Chitravati river—thus meeting his end in a manner reminiscent of Rāma. And Sathya Sai Baba does say of himself:

This body has been assumed to serve a purpose: the establishment of *Dharma* and the teaching of *Dharma*. When that purpose is over, this Body will disappear, like a bubble on the waters [(25-12-1970) S10 39:262].

Here, as in the passage that I quoted from Parrinder above, the "purpose" of the avatar is emphasized—support for the suggestion that I made earlier that this is a "universal" of the avatar traditions—purpose even seems to determine the avatar's lifespan. And Sathya Sai Baba is not alone in this view—it is said of Adigalar too that: 'As soon as the main objective is completed the Avatar goes back to the kingdom of God that is Sukshma ["subtle"] world, in the predetermined way'⁵⁴. As to what effect such an end might have upon Sathya Sai Baba's following, I might note a potentially parallel case in the fact that the (appropriately named) Swāmi Rāma Tīrtha (d.1906)—a modern Indian avatar who committed suicide by drowning—was glorified by his followers for having met his end in the manner of Rāma⁵⁵. As Bassuk (1987b:100) notes, [one story of] Caitanya's death has him too ending his earthly sojourn in this manner. Clearly, tales of Rāma's passing constitute the major paradigm for subsequent avatar figures (I have not heard of any modern figures who are presented as having been shot in the foot, like Kṛṣṇa).

Oddly, Bassuk (1987b:182) sees a 'SUFFERING DEATH' as a mytheme of the avatar traditions—describing this in the case of the modern avatars as follows:

The model of Jesus and his crucifixion has entered the general consciousness of mankind. Meher Baba suffered one mishap after another and viewed it as the divine plan that Avatars must suffer. Ramakrishna was afflicted with cancer of the throat, which was his 'cross to bear'.

⁵² <http://members.rediff.com/saivani/SriSathyaSaiBaba.htm> [23-5-2007]

⁵³ Tagare (1978), part 5, pp.2117

⁵⁴ <http://www.omsakthi.org/writings/avatar3.html> [20-2-2007]

⁵⁵ See R.Rinehart (1999), p.124.

It is true that, as in Christianity where Jesus' suffering is understood as an atonement for human sins, so the dying Ramakrishna was addressed by a devotee who said, 'Sir, your illness is for the sake of others. You take upon yourself the sins of those who come to you. You fall ill because you accept their sins'. But, even here, there are docetic interpretations—for Ramakrishna: 'Only the body suffers. When the mind is united to God it can feel no pain', and he was only unable to pray for healing for himself because his will was merged with that of the Divine Mother⁵⁶.

Similarly, Aurobindo held that: 'all those claimed to be Avatars have died—some by violence [i.e. Krishna], some by cancer [i.e. Ramakrishna], some of indigestion [i.e. Buddha] etc.'⁵⁷, and Aurobindo's devotees observed of him, illness-stricken on his own deathbed, that they had 'seen Him curing the illnesses of others. But now at this crucial hour He had no interest in Himself!'⁵⁸ But, when asked about his condition, he is said to have replied: "Trouble? Nothing troubles me—and suffering! one can be above it." And Meher Baba, of whom Bassuk is presumably predominantly thinking, died after suffering several severe and undiagnosable illnesses⁵⁹—after predicting that he would end his days as a victim of a dramatic and violent murder⁶⁰. But even he sees suffering as ultimately 'illusory'.

Meher Baba did, however, exhibiting his Christian influences, state: 'still, within the realm of illusion, it is suffering.... That was why I suffered incalculable spiritual agonies'⁶¹. But Sathya Sai Baba's attitude resonates more with that of the other figures described above—he says of one of his many accidental injuries:

Although there was excruciating pain on account of the injury, through self-control, My mind did not think about it. If the mind had been dwelling on the pain, the pain would have been greater. The best medicine for the pain is diverting the mind. ...The body is subject to ailment from time to time. It comes and goes. If I rid myself of any ailment instantaneously, people may comment: What a selfish person is Sai Baba? He cures His illness immediately. But He does not remove the pain of others. ...Sometimes I take on the ailments of the others. I do this for My own delight and not out of any external pressure [(26-8-1988) S21 23:187-188].

There is a further contrast here with Meher Baba, for whom the avatar does not take upon himself the illnesses of devotees⁶².

⁵⁶ Pavitrnananda (1943), p.584-585

⁵⁷ Nirodbaran (1983), Vol.1, p.169

⁵⁸ <http://www.searchforlight.org/lotusgroove/sadhaks/aCallfromPondicherry.htm> [23-5-2007]

⁵⁹ Needleman (1970), p.88

⁶⁰ Purdom (1964), p.272

⁶¹ J. Needleman (1970), p.82 [excerpting Meher Baba (1967), p.248]

⁶² Purdom (1964), p.391.

Interestingly, it is said of Aurobindo in regard to his successor, Mother Meera, that: ‘Just before Sri Aurobindo died he poured all of the Force from his body into her body’⁶³, and Sathya Sai Baba too claims: ‘Before I shed the mortal coil, I will distribute My spiritual assets fairly among My true devotees’⁶⁴. Given that, as we saw earlier, he claims that he will reincarnate himself as “Prema Sai” after the demise of his current body, this claim can only lead to problems for his devotees⁶⁵. This was certainly so in the case of Meher Baba—who had promised that one day he would break his self-imposed silence and manifest his avataric identity to the world, but died without uttering a single word. This created divisions amongst his followers, some of who thought that he had somehow cryptically broken this silence and others who are waiting for a “resurrection” or “second-coming” type event (to invoke Christian paradigms)⁶⁶.

Finally, I would note that Sathya Sai Baba has occasionally (and inconsistently) given predictions as to the precise year of his death—indicating, for example, that this will be 2019⁶⁷. Meher Baba too gave a specific prediction for the date of his death⁶⁸, but, while this proved no more accurate than his predictions as to the manner of his death or of his breaking his silence, this fact did not seem to cause so much difficulty for his followers. But then, they had Meher Baba’s continuing physical presence to guide them, whereas, if Sathya Sai Baba should pass away earlier than his prediction, the situation might be different. Indications at this stage, however, are that the Sathya Sai Organisation would have little trouble coping with an early departure on Sathya Sai Baba’s part—already a rumor that he has himself recently mentioned such a possibility has found seemingly easy and cheerful acceptance amongst devotees to whom I have spoken. And the justification that he (supposedly) gave for this fact was that he has nearly achieved the “purpose” for which he came (the “universal” of the avatar concept, cf. pp.68,391 above)—one final use to which he may put his avatar persona⁶⁹.

Everything that we have seen in this study, but perhaps especially in this section, constitutes a vast fund of source material upon which Sathya Sai Baba has

⁶³ http://www.pro-researcher.co.uk/encyclopaedia/english/the_mother [23-5-2007]

⁶⁴ SSSA 405

⁶⁵ Cf. Swallow (1982), pp.136-137.

⁶⁶ Needleman (1970), p.88.

⁶⁷ Sathya Sai Baba (29-9-1960) S1 31:198

⁶⁸ ‘By the end of April 1955, I shall drop this body’ (Purdom, 1964, p.271); he died in 1969.

⁶⁹ (14-10-1999) cf. (6-3-2008) <http://sathyasai.org/discour/2008/do8o3o6.pdf> [29-3-2008]

drawn, draws, and might further draw in “keeping up appearances” of avatar status—even as his health (apparently) fails him—and it is thus likely that, so long as he is alive, his movement will continue to flourish, despite much adverse publicity. And, after that, perhaps the other fact that I tagged as a “universal” of avatar ideas will come into play: “avatars are repeated”. We have seen some of Sathya Sai Baba’s predictions to this effect (p.334). Maybe this “universal” is of greater import than I earlier construed it to be (p.68 above). But, of course, my task has not primarily been philosophical, although I have dabbled in philosophy (especially in this and the previous section). I have not attempted to present any neat analysis of the avatar traditions, although I have drawn upon and discussed several of these. What I have done is to relate Sathya Sai Baba’s ideas to some of the particulars of the history of the avatar traditions, in an attempt to provide a background against which they might better be understood. In the next section, I will ruminate some more upon what we have seen, and will attempt to draw what conclusions I can from this.

6.3 Conclusions

Conclusions bind; they press on the mind.

The newborn baby is not confined to conclusions.

All conclusions enslave. Most men are slaves to the conclusions into which they have fallen. ...Dare to remain inconclusive.¹

Sathya Sai Baba, as we saw in the first chapter of this study, is certainly an influential, enigmatic, and controversial figure—accused of sexual abuse, fraud, and complicity in murder. He has long predicted his current widespread popularity and the concomitant expansion of his hometown, and seems to revel in controversy. He rarely gives straight answers to any question, and the statement at top here (if it indeed reflects his views)² perhaps gives another indication as to why this might be. In what we have seen to be Sathya Sai Baba’s favoured non-dualistic worldview, conclusions—as dualistic linguistic entities—must necessarily “bind” (the opposite to this being the traditional ideal of “liberation”).

This is an important point. Sathya Sai Baba’s devotees and detractors tend to take his statements at face value, but we have seen that—however overstated, factually inaccurate, or even ridiculous they may seem—they often point to an ideological lesson³, or serve a more indirect pedagogical purpose⁴. As I pointed out in the first chapter, there is little that I can really conclude on the serious issue of the allegations made against Sathya Sai Baba, and, in comparison to these, what I have done in this study will seem trivial to some people. But we did see instances in which Sathya Sai Baba’s divine persona, his identity as “God”, or “the avatar”, is invoked in the context of the sexual abuse allegations; in which he himself invoked his divine identity in the event of “murder” charges against him; and in which he

¹ Attrib. Sathya Sai Baba (http://www.ramalacentre.com/newslettero3_o2_o3.htm [26-5-2007] NB The reference to a ‘newborn baby’ here is presumably analogous to (or perhaps even influenced by) the well known proclamation of Jesus: ‘unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’ (*Matthew* 18:3, NIVSB).

² NB The passage quoted here is presented at <http://postpoems.com/cgi-bin/displaypoem.cgi?pid=196126> [26-5-2007] as a psychic ‘revelation’ written down by one of his devotees and ‘approved by Sai Baba for publication’, but I would note that one part of it—in which a devotee is made to tell Sathya Sai Baba: ‘We rely on your Grace, we yearn for it’, eliciting the answer ‘I never asked you to earn Me’—is typical of Sathya Sai Baba, in that the question answered is not the question asked, and, what’s more, is a pun on the same (cf. pp.385,168 above). It has more of the ring of an actual experience, than of a product of some person’s (sub)conscious fabrication (cf. p.77,n.18 above).

³ A good example of this is his portraying Jesus as predicting the Sai avatar (“the Lamb”, “Ba-ba”, see p.339). Devotee’s tend to take this as evidence of Sathya Sai Baba’s divine status (e.g., Ruhela, 1996b, 71-73); his detractors ridicule it on the ground of its factual inaccuracies. But we saw that Sathya Sai Baba himself uses it as an *arthavāda*—to point to the “truth” of “God incarnating in all”.

⁴ I.e., he puts the authority engendered by his avatar claims to the service of spiritual teaching.

variously connects it with or superordinates it to his famous “miracles”. We also saw his avatar persona connected by him to his predictions of his popularity, and we have seen that it is a strong theme in devotees’ representations of him.

For all of these reasons then, Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar persona is important—and, as I showed in Chapter 2, it is a more pervasive aspect of his identity than earlier scholarly accounts have noted it to be (Swallow focusing upon the role of Śiva; Babb focusing on miracles; Srinivas subordinating it to sociological factors). This is the first, and perhaps easiest, conclusion to which we might come. Not so easy, is the question of interpreting Sathya Sai Baba’s many and varied representations of his persona. Are these are merely evidence of psychopathology, as some of his detractors suggest, or might there be “method in this (apparent) madness”? This is one of the major questions with which I began this study (p.57 above), and it is not an easy one to answer. There is the question of what constitutes “madness”; we saw in the first chapter the testimony of at least one expert in the field that Sathya Sai Baba might best be considered as a split (but still “healthy”) personality. And, perhaps, there is the question of what constitutes “method”; we saw in Section 1.2 (p.52) that Sathya Sai Baba professes to favour “indirect” methods, and, certainly, we are not dealing with a case of systematic philosophy—I have had to rely largely on inference in uncovering his methods.

My own approach has thus been a somewhat indirect one—a tour through religious traditions produced over the course of more than three millennia, and I have outlined and discussed many academic side-issues in the process. Both my study and Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings are attempts to represent what it means to be an avatar in the wake of thousands of years of Indian religious traditions, and it could be argued that my work suffers from some of the failings (and perhaps lacks all of the virtues) of Sathya Sai Baba’s own speeches and writings—*viz.* “cluttered eclecticism”; “inclusivism”; and much “ad hoc” analysis. I have taken the views of numerous scholars out of their original contexts, coordinated them with each other (as in Section 4.4), and included them in various parts of my presentation, at the same time excluding other views as being only “partially” valid (or even mostly “wrong”)—a sort of transcendent inclusivism. But my methods do draw, albeit eclectically, more upon the canons of academia than do those of Sathya Sai Baba.

Moreover, part of my thesis has been that the history of ideas of the avatar, and Sathya Sai Baba’s extremely varied representations of them, cannot be adequately described by any neat theological analysis. I have considered as full a range of po-

tentially relevant material as possible, and have tried to interpret it by whatever means seemed to me to be conducive to an intelligible representation of it. In my own way, and to the best of my ability, I have investigated Sathya Sai Baba's agency in claiming to be "the avatar" (how and to what purposes he makes this claim), and have outlined something of the milieu within which he operates—primarily its theological aspects, but touching upon some more general religious, political, and cultural themes (divine kingship, devotion, South Indian traditions, modern influences). At the very least, I have marshalled much information from disparate sources into an coherent narrative portraying the origins and development of Sathya Sai Baba's persona and the traditions upon which it is based.

And I hope that I have indicated that there may be some "method" (however loose or indirect) behind Sathya Sai Baba's avatar claims—that he does seem to put his avatar persona to pedagogical ends—often directed towards traditional "non-dualist", *advaita*, understandings, or, less subtly, to promoting an ethical agenda—this despite the great variety of traditions to which he refers. We have seen that he holds *advaita* views akin to those of Śaṅkara, for whom scriptural injunctions are sacred and valid until spiritual realization is attained. It could be said of Sathya Sai Baba, as it has been of Śaṅkara, that he is 'guiding pupils to the advaitin insight on the basis of the multiple insights of scripture, unified, as he believes, by the principle of non-duality'⁵.

Nevertheless, whilst Suthren Hirst (2005:95) rejects the suggestion of some scholars that 'Śaṅkara is not really interested in establishing the truth through argument, but simply uses whatever argument is to hand to further his case', this does seem to apply to Sathya Sai Baba. The "multiple insights of scripture" upon which he draws display a level of inconsistency that is incompatible with what we can surmise of Śaṅkara's views. They have more in common with what Urban (2005:174) cites Rajneesh/Osho as claiming: 'I am consistently inconsistent... I live in the moment and whatsoever I am saying right now is true for this moment. ...I don't think of the future at all'. Sathya Sai Baba indeed claims that he 'does not think'⁶, and we saw earlier (p.15) his attestations to the impromptu and unpremeditated nature of his speeches. But there is nothing distinctively modern about this aspect of Osho's teaching. His views recall something of what Dandekar (1979:116-117) notes to be a tendency that 'has characterised Hinduism almost

⁵ Suthren Hirst (2005), p.86

⁶ MBI 195 (9-12-1980)

throughout its history’, citing Max Müller’s description of a “henotheistic” strand in the Vedas—the tendency to ‘address either Indra or Agni or Varuna as, for the time being, the only god in existence[,] with an entire forgetfulness of all other gods’⁷. In Osho’s case, there is an “entire forgetfulness” of all other philosophical ideas (akin, in this context, to gods—Osho was more of a philosopher than a theologian) in favour of the inspiration of the moment. This, alongside the other traditional tendencies that we have seen, goes some way towards explaining the extraordinary extent of what we saw Babb refer to as Sathya Sai Baba’s “cluttered eclecticism”. In addition to transcendent inclusivism, predicated on *advaita* ideology, and coordinating, but subordinating, inclusivism, he may at one time or another praise one particular deity or form of religion as supreme—presumably to intensify his devotees’ participation in such (i.e. akin to the Purāṇic *māhātmyas*, see p.219); or he may simply adopt whatever scriptural tradition is topical, or at hand, in order to make whatever point (ethical or spiritual) that he feels to be important at any particular time.

This is surely a richer understanding of Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings than Babb’s rather dismissive take on these. His teachings are not, to reiterate Babb’s characterization, merely “cluttered eclecticism” or a “tambūrālike background drone”; he is not (as anti Sathya Sai Baba internet activists sometimes refer to him) just ‘Sai Blah Blah’⁸. Or, to put it in even stronger terms, he does not *just* talk “bullshit”—although, in the “technical” sense proposed by Harry G. Frankfurt⁹, he does to some extent do this. Frankfurt (2005:51ff.) contrasts ‘a *program* of producing bullshit to whatever extent the circumstances require’ to straight-out ‘lying’—which he sees as the lesser of the two evils, for it ‘requires a degree of craftsmanship, in which the teller of the lie submits to the objective constraints imposed by what he takes to be the truth’. Frankfurt’s valuation is obviously subjective, but his characterization of a ‘bullshit artist’ partly fits what we have seen of Sathya Sai Baba:

His focus is panoramic rather than particular. He does not limit himself to inserting a certain falsehood at a specific point, and thus he is not constrained by the truths surrounding that point or intersecting it. He is prepared, so far as required, to fake the context as well. ...This is less a matter of craft than of art. ...the truth values of his statements are of no central interest to him.... This does not mean that his speech is anarchically impulsive, but that the motive guiding and controlling it is

⁷ NB Gonda (1977:278) notes a continuity of this in ‘a fundamental principle of *bhakti* religion, ...the worship of one single deity or one particular *avatāra* or emanation’.

⁸ E.g. http://home.hetnet.nl/~ex_baba/engels/articles/p_holbach/index.htm [9-7-2007]

⁹ See also David Kellogg (2006).

unconcerned with how the things about which he speaks truly are.

Nonetheless, while we have seen that Sathya Sai Baba is unconcerned with “how the *things* about which he speaks truly are”, we have also seen that he clearly is concerned with “the moral of the story”—with the values and philosophies that he is attempting to impart—and this is not the case with Frankfurt’s ideal bullshitter. Frankfurt asks: ‘Why is there so much bullshit?’ And he suggests that:

Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about. Thus the production of bullshit is stimulated whenever a person’s obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic exceed his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic.

Sathya Sai Baba’s impromptu speeches, usually occasioned by religious festivals, might be seen as ideal instances of this—excepting that his “topics” are almost invariably ethical and spiritual—and about such topics, I would suggest (if his own intense religious practices and experiences, and the huge success of his educational and humanitarian projects, are anything to go by), he knows a great deal.

Given what we have seen to be Sathya Sai Baba’s *advaita* orientation, it is noteworthy that even in traditional variants of this philosophy, the spiritual “truth” transcends all worldly facts and descriptions—from this perspective, there is a sense in which “everything is bullshit”. Certainly, such a proclamation would not seem out of place in the ideas of the likes of Osho and Adi Da¹⁰. But, as we have seen, this is often not understood to be equally the case; in transcendent inclusivism, or in understanding scriptural passages as *arthavādas*, some things, some ideas, are taken as useful in “pointing beyond the world” to the transcendent “Self”. And we have seen that Sathya Sai Baba sometimes uses his avatar persona in just this manner (see, especially, Sections 3.3 and 4.3).

Of course, in order to do so, he must first create and maintain this persona, but the fact that this *is* a *persona*, that it is ultimately *false*, does not necessarily detract from its potential efficacy. Karl Potter (1981:54) writes:

Although even the great sentences of the Upaniṣads (*mahāvākyas*) are ultimately false, says Śaṅkara, because they are language and so the products of ignorance, still one can be liberated by hearing a falsehood, just as one can be killed by being frightened by an illusory snake.

Can one be “liberated” by understandings prompted by Sathya Sai Baba’s avatar persona? We have seen hints that he, at least, views this to be the case. There is a sense in which his avatar identity (“I am God” etc., cf. p.366) can be seen in paral-

¹⁰ See, e.g., Urban (2003b), pp.241,256; Urban (2005), p.174.

lel with charismatic “self-authenticating proclamations” of Jesus (“I am the resurrection and the life” etc.), or of Kṛṣṇa (“I am everything” etc.). And I would adduce here the similar proclamations of prominent Sūfīs like al-Hallāj (“I am Reality” etc.) and of Śaṅkara (“I am Kāśī”—the holiest of Hindu cities). I would suggest that all of these, in addition to imbuing their speakers with charismatic authority, can be seen as serving a pedagogical function. All of these proclamations can be seen as provocations to religious believers for whom these sacred entities symbolise distant spiritual goals; these are radical means of shifting the understandings of such persons towards a greater focus upon their own psychology (and immediate environment) and/or their devotion to their religious teacher.

Despite such “radical means”, we have seen that Sathya Sai Baba’s orientation is basically that of a traditionalist. We have seen a number of significant continuities between his ideas and those of some of the leading exponents of Neo-Hinduism, but we have also seen that Sathya Sai Baba himself is not a source of novel Neo-Hindu forms—he uses modern material in traditional ways. To reiterate the words of Bowen (1985:509) that I cited in Chapter 1, we have seen that, while Sathya Sai Baba uses “modernity as a medium of expression, and as a source of metaphor in teaching”, he does not adopt any fundamentally modern (secular, scientific, or historical) ways of thinking. He does not (in Hacker’s definition) “reinterpret” traditional ideas in the light of modern philosophies; rather, he “finds” traditional spiritual and ethical ideals in modern forms. Despite his patent modern influences (and some that I have made patent above), he is very much a traditionalist; we have seen more continuities between Sathya Sai Baba’s ideas and earlier traditions than we have seen changes. This is not to say that Sathya Sai Baba does not innovate—on the contrary, we have seen that he often does—but we have also seen that he does so very much as a “mode of tradition”. He modifies traditions in traditional ways, and, as I have repeatedly pointed out, he usually does this to serve traditional and/or ethical ends.

These, then, are my answers to two of the key questions with which I began this study: “Why does Sathya Sai Baba portray himself as an avatar?” and “How traditional is his representation of this persona?” (p.57 above). The other, straightforward, but (as I suggested at the time) still important question: “What does Sathya Sai Baba say about the idea of (especially himself as) the avatar?” I have also answered. If not an entirely comprehensive survey of what Sathya Sai Baba has to say of his divine identity, I have at least produced a thoroughly repre-

sentative account. Less representative, is my “history of avatar ideas” as a whole, but I have, nonetheless, presented a fairly large amount of material on this, and I can perhaps draw a few general conclusions from this.

I mentioned at the end of Chapter 2 above that Madeleine Biarreau (especially) has criticized discretely compartmentalized treatments of Hinduism, the like of which I have presented here, but such divisions have surely been necessary given the volume and diversity of the material that we have encountered. Likewise, whilst Hildebeitel (1983:207) notes that Biarreau similarly dismisses a number of scholarly theories purporting to account for the origins of various avatar figures, again, I prefer to think that there is value in some of these. Sheth (2001:101) notes some major variants:

European and non-Vaisnavite Hindu scholars have proposed various theories in connection with the *avatāras*. (1) Viṣṇuization: a particular *avatāra* was originally not considered to be a form of Viṣṇu but “Viṣṇuized” only later on. For example, in earlier texts the fish is mentioned only as a fish and not connected with any deity; later it is associated with Prajāpati, and only still later considered an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. (2) Apotheosis: the *avatāra* in question was first a human hero who was later divinized. For example, it is claimed that Rāma is portrayed only as a hero in the earlier parts (books 2-6) of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, but regarded as divine in the later parts (books 1 and 7). (3) Composite Personality: for example, Kṛṣṇa the child god, adolescent lover, and adult hero are supposed to be three different Kṛṣṇas who were later combined into one composite personality.

The first of these seems undeniable; the third, I will refer to shortly. We have only encountered much controversy regarding the second, and what we have seen of this is insufficient for us to draw any conclusions—there is far more to this debate than I have even been able to touch upon. But we have seen that even Sathya Sai Baba, who sometimes holds the *Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa* to be a literal record of historical truth (see p.173), proclaims that Vālmiki began writing this work with the opinion that Rāma was an ideal man, before finally coming to believe that Rāma was fully divine (see p.187). This, at least, is food for thought.

What other conclusions can I draw? There are a few more things that I can say—both of Sathya Sai Baba and of other (modern and traditional) avatar figures. Firstly, whilst we saw that Sathya Sai Baba undoubtedly exhibits close similarities to many of the other modern Indian avatar figures, I have highlighted a major distinction between him and these others—the unusual extent of his self-made claim to be “the avatar”. Behind this difference, from what we have seen, lie several factors. Most tentatively, I would suggest a contribution from something of the his-

tory of his geographical region (echoes of divine kingship, egalitarianism, broad inclusivism) and/or the elevated status of his bardic caste (see Chapters 5 and 7). More evident, is the “authority” that he believes his advaitic convictions confer upon him (see p.240)—he seems to have sincerely and fully identified himself with “the Highest” (p.274), with *ātman/brahman*, and believes that this identity is the *sine qua non* of avatarhood (p.235, cf. p.259—where he denies avatar status to Jesus for this reason). Most obvious, is his inventive use of, and broad acquaintance with, traditional avatar ideas (rather than “knowledge of tradition”—we have seen that he rarely makes explicit citations of traditional sources), both of these perhaps being a reflection of his bardic caste background. Contributing to this also, are perhaps an intense period of personal study of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (the *locus classicus* of avatar ideas, p.195), and a thorough knowledge of the *Shri Sai Satcharita* (the major account casting Shirdi Sai Baba as an avatar, p.98). On top of this, is a strong influence upon him of the ideas of Ramakrishna—who claimed to be an avatar, and Vivekananda—who promoted Ramakrishna as “the greatest of avatars”. Similarly important, are a significant influence of Theosophical Society expectations of “the avatar to come” (he was literally “schooled” in these); some influence of (misinterpretations of) the ideas of Aurobindo on the “descent of Kṛṣṇa” (to Aurobindo, a state of mind—to Sathya Sai Baba a literal descent); a tendency to define himself over-and-against other modern avatar claimants (like Meher Baba); and his strong background in intense devotional experiences (paralleling, to a lesser extent, those of Caitanya).

There is thus some justification for what Bassuk (1987b:94) notes to be an:

evolution of an awareness of divinity, starting with Chaitanya who is unconscious of being an Avatar, then Ramakrishna who is semiconscious of his divinity, followed by Aurobindo and The Mother who are conscious of each other as Avatars, then Meher Baba who is self-conscious of his Avatarhood, and ending with Satya Sai Baba who is unself-conscious about his divine status. A gradual evolving of the cognisance of divinity has transpired among these historical God-men and God-woman [sic].

Bassuk paints in broad strokes, but this is an example in which his insights are partly borne out—he made this assertion based upon far less information than we have seen here, but it proves to be of some validity nonetheless. Bassuk’s work has attracted some criticisms in this last regard, and my work is no doubt open to some of the same sorts of criticisms, but I have at least tried to base my ideas more upon specific details. Francis X. Clooney (1988:177-178) comments on the deficiencies of Bassuk’s work:

Questions that theologians and historians of religion might ask are never raised: for example, if, as the author admits, the Gita never uses the word *avatara*, how is it still true that Gita 4.6–7 “states the doctrine clearly and unambiguously” (p. 5)? When and why did the idea that there were ten *avataras* of Visnu come into vogue and reorganize earlier, diverse materials? When were the many strands of Kṛṣṇaite myth combined into one “life story”? Did Ramakrishna mean by *avatara* what earlier generations had meant, and does Satya Sai Baba mean the same as either?

It has not been my aim to answer questions of this kind—my focus has very much been on Sathya Sai Baba—but I can at least hint at some answers to most of these questions. I will briefly summarize here what we have seen in regard to these.

We saw that neither the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, nor the *Mahābhārata*, nor the *Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa* use the term *avatāra*, but that they do convey some very avatar-like ideas, and that *Bhagavad-Gītā* 4:6-7 has become a veritable *locus classicus* of avatar ideas—recall Sathya Sai Baba’s observation that it “has been quoted so often and by so many that it has lost all significance” (p.197). We saw that ideas about the number of avatars “varied hopelessly before 800 CE”, and that—even after that, even within one work, the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, the most homogeneous of the Purāṇas, the number of avatars is variously posited to be “twenty-four, seven, eight, fourteen, twenty-one”, “twenty-two”, or “innumerable” (p.215). We also saw something of the Sāṃkhya philosophy underlying such enumerations, and I suggested that they must have had a mnemonic function, albeit that, ironically, this can only have contributed to the diversity of avatar accounts (if one knows there should be 10 avatars, but can only remember 7, new figures must be added).

Moreover, we saw how some of the earlier mythic material was “reorganized” and absorbed into the category of avatar. Through interlocking chains of resemblances forged in accordance with ritual ideology and perhaps collapsed into identifications under the influence of upaniṣadic ideas, the figures of Indra, Viṣṇu, the Puruṣa, Nārāyaṇa, and Prajāpati coalesced—so too Vāsudeva and Kṛṣṇa—and, likely under the influence of ideas of divine kingship, Rāma came to be seen as an avatar, along with Pṛthu (the legendary “first king”). Sages like Kapila (founder of Sāṃkhya) were added for obvious reasons, and I have cited a number of more in-depth historical studies on the “reorganization” of the material foundational to other avatar accounts (Soifer on Narasiṃha and Vāmana; Matchett on Kṛṣṇa; and I would add here that some of Dandekar’s articles on the origins of Kṛṣṇa offer good suggestions as to “when the many strands of Kṛṣṇaite myth combined into one life story”). Finally, we have seen that Ramakrishna to a large extent *did not* mean the

same by the term *avatāra* that the epic traditions had meant; he (generally) saw the avatar as a “human messenger of God” rather than as a “descent” of a deity (p.313), but we saw that Sathya Sai Baba—whilst himself evidently being influenced in other respects by Ramakrishna’s views—does more literally adopt earlier understandings, albeit often innovating in putting these to the service of his spiritual (*advaita*) and ethical goals.

Some other major themes of note in what we have seen are those upon which I have focused in this chapter: claims of the avatar acting as an exemplar, and indeed “acting” human—in line with the “docetic” avatar ideas that, contrary to Parrinder’s assertions, we have seen to predominate across a wide chronological range of avatar traditions. I also revisited in this context ideas of the “historicity” of the avatars—another, more minor, theme of my study as a whole—and I will finish here by citing one of Parrinder’s (1970:126) more obvious forays into the area of academic theology, an area that I have hitherto shunned. If nothing else, this may be of some relevance to predicting the future of Sathya Sai Baba and his cult:

Historians may, or may not, be able to judge of the occurrence of particular events, but only faith can declare whether these events are disclosures of God, in a different way from other earthly happenings.

Ideas of the avatar are ultimately as unfalsifiable as the idea of “God” itself, and, for Sathya Sai Baba’s followers (myself included), “the faith that moves mountains” (even if Sathya Sai Baba reneges on his prophecy that he will literally “move an entire mountain range”, see p.219), looks set to carry on his work well into the foreseeable future. As I write this, my bags are packed for another trip to Prashanthi Nilayam. I do not expect to personally meet Sathya Sai Baba, but, as best as I can conclude from my assessment of the devotional literature that has been written about him, stranger things have happened.

EPILOGUE

I am not Sathya Sai Baba.¹

Strange things did not eventuate on my trip to see Sathya Sai Baba; I was unable to talk to him, and the only way that I was able to show him my PhD thesis was to post it to him. I have no idea whether he received it or not (Indian postal services are notoriously unreliable), but I was content to have made an effort to submit it to my *guru*. Nothing happened during my trip that would in any way alter the general conclusions that I have come to in this thesis. Sathya Sai Baba did come out in one of his speeches with the statement quoted at top here, and this was taken by some of those present (including his translator Anil Kumar) as being rather strange, but he went on to explain it in *advaita* terms that are familiar to us:

Sathya Sai Baba is the name given to this body. I don't have any particular name. ...you are not different from others. Those who are unaware of this spiritual principle become victims of ignorance and are subjected to delusion.

Later, in a second speech, he elaborated upon this in even more familiar terms:

this body has been given the name Sathya. This name is given to the body and not to Me. I am not the body. I am not the mind. I am not the intellect. I am not the *Chittha* (memory and determinative faculty). I am not imagination.²

Whilst I did not get to speak to Sathya Sai Baba, I did come across a conversation between him and some of his students (reported in the recently published fifth volume of his authorized biography) that nicely rounds off this theme and provides a fitting epilogue to my study. Narasimha Murthy (2005:1-2) writes:

Baba asked the boys pointing to Himself, "Who am I?"

The answer came almost immediately; "God!" shouted many boys simultaneously. ...But Baba smiled and said, "Not correct!"

...One of the boys said, "Swami, You are *Shiva Shakti swaroopa*!"

All looked at Bhagawan expectantly. ...He said, "Not correct!"

...One of the students made bold to say, "Swami, You are Sri Krishna come again!"

Baba laughed aloud and repeated, "Not correct!"

"Swami, You are *Sarva Devata swaroopa*!" said one of the elderly devotees.

"Not correct!"

...One of [the] devotees pleaded, "Swami, please tell us who You are!"

"I am I!" declared Bhagawan. ..."To say 'I am this or that', is *dwaita bhavam* – duality. 'I am I' means *adwaitam* or *ekatvam* – oneness. That is the ultimate truth."

¹ (26-7-2007) <http://sathyasai.org/discour/2007/do7o726.pdf> [29-3-2008]

² (28-7-2007) <http://sathyasai.org/discour/2007/do7o728.pdf> [29-3-2008]

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¹ NB Hereunder I omit giving the date of publication after the publisher details if this is not different from the date of first publication, which I give in brackets before the name of the work. Where I do not know the date of first publication, I use the date of (current) publication at left. When no details of the publication date are available, I use the abbreviation "nd" (no date).

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² NB See Padmanaban (2000:576ff.) for an extensive bibliography of primary sources on the early period of Sathya Sai Baba's life.

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INDEX (Authors, Terms & Traditional Works)

This is an automatically generated index—an index of specific terms, rather than general topics. I have merely collated the various forms of key terms that occur in this document and labelled them with a representative term (e.g., if there were not too many instances of the term *avatar* for me to list it here, all references to “avatar”, “Avathaar”, “Avatar”, “Avathara”, “Avathaara”, “*avatāra* etc”. would occur in this index under the entry “avatar”). These terms include surnames of authors (and other key figures) I have cited; most of the Sanskrit works and words to which I have referred; a few uncommon English words (inclusivism, ethicization, etc.); and a few other significant names and terms (Jesus, Buddha, Docetism, charisma etc.).

- Abbott, 90, 406
 abheda, 239, 242
 abhishekam, 271
 ācārya, 141, 165
 Achyutha, 121, 290
 acintya, 59
 acintyabhedābheda, 241
 Ackerman, 78, 85, 414, 418
 adharma, 68, 181, 195, 196, 206, 266
 adhikārabheda, 202
 Adhiparasakthi, 357, 358
 adhyāropa, 161
 adhyāsa, 161
 Adhyātma, 188, 218, 249, 250, 352, 373, 384, 387, 408
 Adi Da, 298, 359, 399, 417
 Adidevānanda, 406
 Adigalar, 35, 227, 298, 309, 321, 325, 350, 357, 358, 364, 387, 391
 advaita, 20, 60, 73, 84, 94, 95, 124, 140, 142, 153, 161, 175, 176, 212, 228, 229, 237, 239, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245, 246, 247, 248, 249, 250, 253, 254, 255, 256, 257, 258, 259, 260, 262, 264, 269, 274, 285, 291, 295, 300, 304, 307, 310, 311, 314, 317, 322, 325, 335, 336, 339, 344, 350, 355, 357, 358, 360, 376, 383, 385, 397, 398, 399, 402, 404, 408, 428
 advandvata, 348
 Agrawala, 153, 414
 aham, 104, 169, 175, 181, 236, 237, 239, 258, 259, 366
 aham brahmāsmi, 169, 239, 258, 259
 ahaṁkāra, 165, 175, 368
 ahimsā, 342
 Ahura Mazda, 163
 aiśvarya, 175, 229, 231, 232
 Aitken, 15, 57, 61, 88, 98, 309, 328, 406
 ākāra, 118
 ākāśa, 182
 Akrūra, 120, 375
 Alder, 335, 406
 al-Hallāj, 258, 259, 335, 352, 400
 alien traditions, 20, 122, 123, 174, 192, 193, 194, 251, 260, 261, 262, 339, 420
 alt.hindu, 239
 Amma (and Bhagavan), 298, 356
 Ammachi, 298, 345, 355, 419
 Amritanandamayī (= Ammachi), 355, 420
 amṛta, 111, 113, 157, 190, 370
 aṁśa, 137, 141, 220, 225, 226, 227, 241, 280
 Aṁśarūpa, 227
 aṁśāvatāra, 226, 227, 332
 aṁśāvataraṇa, 179
 anaatma, 23
 Ānakadundubhi, 182
 Anand, 7, 168, 375, 406, 421
 ānanda, 73, 210, 236, 256
 Ānandagiri, 382
 Anandamayee Ma, 408
 ananta, 111

- Anantapur, 281, 284, 291, 312
 Andhra, 159, 281, 282, 284, 285, 330, 423, 426
 androgyny, 40, 108, 109, 110, 221, 278, 279, 280, 290
 Aniruddha, 163, 164, 174, 175, 423
 anirvacanīya, 385
 Anjaneya, 310
 Annamācārya, 234, 235
 antarikṣa, 152
 antaryāmin, 173, 176, 264
 anugraha, 168, 169
 Anugrahamurti, 289
 anumitva, 348
 anyarūpaḥ, 130
 apārthiva, 64
 Āpastamba, 97, 103, 104, 105
 apavāda, 256
 aprākṛta, 64, 386
 Apūrṇa, 226
 Āraṇyakas, 155
 āraṭi, 122, 275, 288
 Aravidus, 291
 arcāvatāra, 173, 226, 227
 Ardhanārīśvara, 290
 Aristotle, 90
 Arjuna, 197, 198, 200, 207, 208, 278, 365
 Arole, 414
 arthavāda, 161, 169, 171, 175, 176, 227, 228, 240, 246, 247, 255, 257, 385, 387, 388, 395, 399
 Aruṇa, 134
 Ārya Samāj, 301, 302, 328
 Aryaman, 147
 aśānti, 70
 asmi, 366
 aṣṭaiśvarya-guṇānvitaḥ, 232
 asuras, 68, 70
 Atharva-Veda, 119, 165, 303
 atimartya, 64
 ātma-māyayā, 181
 ātman, 13, 23, 58, 60, 73, 148, 153, 155, 162, 167, 181, 196, 235, 236, 238, 239, 240, 244, 245, 248, 253, 255, 257, 259, 260, 279, 304, 334, 335, 350, 365, 366, 372, 376, 402
 Ātma-śatakam, 237
 āttā, 257
 Aurobindo, 61, 188, 206, 278, 297, 298, 309, 318, 319, 336, 337, 338, 341, 343, 344, 346, 347, 357, 365, 368, 373, 377, 392, 393, 402, 406, 407, 410, 412, 413, 415, 418
 autohagiographical, 37
 autotheology, 359
 avadhūta, 226
 Avatar of Synthesis, 333
 avataraṇa, 136, 179, 374
 avatāravariṣṭhāya, 306
 Avatarhood, 50, 66, 118, 232, 297, 343, 365, 402
 avatārin, 356
 avatīrya, 137
 avatī, 374
 āveśāvatāra, 224, 227, 228
 Avestan, 163
 avidya, 386
 avikṣata, 128
 āviśya, 203
 āviveśa, 223
 avyaya, 203
 avyayātmā, 202, 243
 Ayodhyā, 376
 Āyurveda, 113, 277, 319, 326
 Babaji, 355, 356, 382
 Babb, 23, 25, 32, 33, 35, 37, 42, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 59, 79, 80, 83, 85, 90, 97, 99, 100, 103, 107, 123, 124, 184, 218, 232, 242, 249, 266, 273, 276, 294, 315, 320, 347, 369, 370, 396, 398, 414
 Bādarāyaṇa, 103
 Badarīnāth, 141, 142, 413
 Bailey, 278, 328, 332, 333, 407
 Baker, 22, 129, 407, 428
 Balarāma, 214
 Balu, 407

- bandhu, 155
 bangaru, 309
 bards, 19, 101, 207, 283, 284, 293, 402
 Barlage, 64, 414
 Basham, 138, 139, 140, 142, 143, 421
 Basheer Baba, 351
 Baskin, 6, 336, 337, 338, 407
 Bassuk, 43, 61, 62, 64, 66, 67, 69, 72, 77, 82, 84, 106, 127, 138, 145, 179, 206, 217, 221, 259, 276, 278, 279, 289, 297, 298, 308, 311, 328, 329, 330, 332, 337, 341, 343, 346, 347, 354, 355, 364, 378, 380, 382, 391, 392, 402, 414, 415, 416
 Baumfield, 295, 414
 Bayly, 276, 414, 421
 Beckerlegge, 126, 294, 296, 302, 303, 310, 314, 317, 320, 321, 322, 414
 Benaras, 258
 Besant, 328, 329, 330, 331, 332
 Beyerstein, 41, 51, 53, 54, 335, 339, 414
 bhadrakok, 312
 bhagas, 219, 229, 230, 231, 280
 Bhagavad-Gītā, 3, 6, 12, 49, 59, 70, 74, 81, 93, 106, 116, 117, 119, 120, 121, 143, 144, 147, 148, 149, 150, 158, 159, 160, 162, 178, 180, 181, 182, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 207, 208, 209, 212, 216, 220, 221, 232, 233, 236, 243, 244, 246, 248, 249, 264, 265, 267, 269, 273, 305, 328, 332, 345, 350, 352, 357, 365, 366, 368, 375, 384, 386, 402, 403, 406, 407, 408, 409, 412, 413, 415, 425
 Bhagavān, 6, 11, 46, 142, 186, 191, 192, 207, 219, 229, 230, 231, 232, 234, 248, 254, 265, 280, 298, 345, 347, 355, 356, 357, 368, 407, 408, 412, 413
 Bhagavān Dās, 234, 368, 407
 Bhagavantam, 14, 411
 Bhāgavata-Purāṇa, 3, 6, 36, 59, 60, 70, 90, 118, 119, 120, 121, 162, 164, 171, 175, 190, 213, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 222, 223, 225, 227, 229, 230, 231, 236, 238, 240, 241, 243, 246, 248, 264, 265, 266, 267, 275, 276, 313, 342, 348, 349, 350, 352, 357, 368, 372, 374, 375, 378, 379, 383, 384, 389, 390, 391, 403, 410, 412, 413, 415, 421, 424, 427
 Bhairava, 108
 Bhaja-Govindam, 240
 bhajan, 32, 122, 270, 272, 275, 277, 278
 Bhajan, 7, 410
 Bhaktamāla, 89
 Bhaktavijaya, 89, 406
 bhakti, 79, 80, 120, 125, 164, 194, 222, 240, 248, 249, 250, 253, 264, 265, 271, 273, 274, 275, 285, 286, 308, 311, 352, 371, 398
 Bhandarkar, 147, 412, 421, 424, 429
 Bharadvāja, 97, 99, 100, 104, 105, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114
 Bharat, 148, 195, 321
 Bhārat, 321
 Bhāratavarṣa, 321
 Bharati, 46, 47, 81, 84, 90, 91, 93, 99, 191, 236, 237, 300, 303, 304, 305, 311, 323, 326, 414, 421
 Bhāratiya, 259, 315, 324, 407, 412, 418, 427, 429
 bhārāvataṛaṇa, 136, 152, 179, 213, 374
 bhāṣaṇam, 266
 Bhaskara, 159
 Bhasma, 89
 bhaṭ, 102, 208
 bhāṭa, 102
 Bhaṭṛāju, 100, 101, 102, 208, 284, 292
 Bhattacharya, 408, 410
 Bhattacharyya, 421
 bhedaḥbheda, 241, 242
 bhedajñāna, 242
 Bhikṣatamurti, 289
 Bhīṣma, 135, 276
 bhogabhūmayah, 321
 Bhṛgu, 109
 Bhṛṅgin, 110
 bhū-bharaṇa, 136

- bhūmiṃ, 172
 bhūpāla, 136
 Biardeau, 79, 125, 144, 220, 401, 415
 Bilimoria, 83, 415
 Blau, 76, 421
 Blavatsky, 328, 329, 356, 407
 Bock, 95, 407
 Bolle, 318, 415
 Bose, 304, 415
 Bottu, 7, 407
 Bowen, 43, 83, 85, 95, 99, 101, 108, 118,
 120, 121, 145, 172, 207, 279, 319, 323,
 339, 348, 400, 415
 Brahmā, 45, 73, 81, 103, 113, 119, 144,
 148, 180, 181, 182, 193, 210, 221, 222,
 224, 239, 268, 287, 340, 374, 423
 brahmācārya, 112, 217, 236
 brahman, 13, 61, 73, 74, 94, 95, 99, 113,
 138, 143, 150, 153, 155, 157, 161, 162,
 169, 181, 182, 188, 235, 236, 238, 241,
 244, 245, 246, 250, 253, 259, 274, 300,
 307, 311, 334, 358, 385, 402, 418, 423
 Brāhmaṇas, 112, 125, 126, 131, 132, 136,
 151, 153, 154, 155, 157, 180, 199
 brahmavid brahmaiva bhavati, 311
 brahmavidyā, 113
 Brahmin, 61, 100, 101, 154, 164, 171, 184,
 186, 220, 261, 285, 286, 329, 409, 419
 Brāhmo Samāj, 301, 313, 331
 Brent, 415
 Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad, 167
 Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-Bhāṣya, 245
 Bṛhaspati, 99, 423
 Brindāvan, 7, 106, 118, 376, 411
 Brockington, 65, 152, 163, 165, 168, 169,
 173, 178, 181, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187,
 188, 190, 191, 195, 206, 207, 208, 210,
 213, 214, 216, 249, 372
 Brooke, 39, 338, 339, 407
 Brown, 148, 152, 178, 268, 269, 407, 421
 Buber, 407
 Budagavi, 271
 Buddha, 31, 73, 104, 127, 139, 214, 216,
 230, 237, 251, 257, 258, 259, 260, 261,
 262, 314, 318, 329, 330, 332, 335, 354,
 359, 361, 376, 377, 381, 392, 422, 423,
 426, 430
 Buddhas, 128, 195, 251, 314
 buddhi, 165
 Buddhism, 257, 357
 Bukka, 286
 Bukkapatnam, 37, 270
 bullshit, 398, 399
 Burghart, 136, 138, 420, 421
 Burke, 26, 27, 74, 421
 Busto, 78, 407
 Cabezón, 27, 421
 Caitanya, 66, 164, 211, 225, 227, 232,
 234, 241, 242, 275, 276, 280, 296, 297,
 307, 308, 311, 313, 341, 346, 371, 380,
 386, 391, 402, 410, 418, 428
 Caitanya Caritāmṛta, 164, 211, 225, 227,
 234, 312, 410
 cakra, 72, 139
 cakravartin, 139, 142
 Calcutta, 312, 382, 407, 409, 413, 418,
 421, 424, 426
 Cape Cormorin, 140
 CAQDAS, 65
 Carr, 26, 421
 categorization, 3, 19, 165, 173, 222, 226,
 261, 305
 caturātmaka, 174
 caturvyūhātman, 174
 caturyuga, 174, 340
 Chāndogya Upaniṣad, 161, 162, 184, 236,
 245
 Chandragiri, 291
 charayalu, 25
 Chari, 44, 53, 173, 415
 charisma, 18, 43, 76, 77, 103, 143, 233,
 261, 305, 430
 charismatic (authority), 3, 76, 78, 81, 170,
 193, 194, 206, 233, 239, 261, 273, 304,
 322, 327, 330, 353, 354, 358, 365, 366,
 388, 400

- Chatterjee, 382, 407
 Chemburkar, 136, 415
 Chetanananda, 311, 407
 Chinmaya, 387
 Chitravati, 16, 391
 Chittoor, 291
 Choudhary, 90, 301, 302, 313, 328, 415
 Chowdamma, 270
 Chowdhury-Sengupta, 302, 322, 349, 415
 Christianity, 12, 13, 20, 24, 27, 28, 31, 32, 39, 63, 64, 82, 126, 138, 191, 192, 193, 218, 253, 257, 259, 263, 276, 277, 301, 302, 304, 305, 306, 307, 313, 314, 320, 322, 329, 330, 333, 338, 339, 357, 358, 365, 373, 378, 381, 383, 388, 392, 393, 408, 414, 415, 416, 417, 419, 422
 Christof, 216, 240, 418, 419, 421, 429
 Christudhas, 289
 cinmātra, 387
 cit, 169, 236, 387
 citta, 175
 Clooney, 415
 Clothey, 418
 conch, 72
 Conlon, 46, 415
 Couture, 62, 136, 179, 210, 374, 380, 415
 Coward, 415, 418
 Cowell, 407
 Crowe, 64, 415
 Cuddappah, 334
 Czarniawska, 421
 daivatvam, 375
 dānava, 183
 Dandekar, 68, 103, 114, 129, 151, 155, 165, 168, 172, 173, 174, 179, 180, 182, 183, 187, 191, 216, 221, 245, 264, 280, 306, 385, 397, 403, 421
 Dange, 421
 Daniélou, 88, 110, 118, 165, 226, 227, 229, 421
 darśana, 21, 132, 242, 266, 287, 290, 329, 335, 348, 407, 410
 darśanam, 266
 daśāṅgulam, 172, 173
 Daśaratha, 189, 372, 376
 daśāvatāras, 214, 340
 Dattātreyā, 86, 88, 89, 90, 96, 214, 215
 Davies, 292, 421
 Day of Siddhi, 337
 Dayananda, 296, 301, 302, 303, 304
 Deleury, 271, 421
 Deshpande, 383, 422
 Deussen, 154, 170, 322, 408, 422
 deva, 31, 120, 140, 182, 236, 348
 Devadeva, 139
 Devādhideva, 139
 Devaki, 120
 Devakī, 223
 devatā, 225, 277, 320, 366
 devatāḥ, 120
 Devi, 158, 279, 282, 287, 288, 296, 306, 345, 406, 408, 426
 Devī, 221, 279, 357
 Devnārāyaṇ, 220, 308, 418
 devotion, 42, 71, 78, 79, 81, 94, 130, 164, 165, 191, 198, 201, 216, 228, 243, 248, 250, 254, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 270, 271, 272, 273, 275, 276, 280, 282, 283, 285, 344, 387, 400
 Dhananjaya, 198
 dharma, 134, 181, 195, 205, 306
 Dharmakshetra, 106, 117
 dharma-rakṣana, 244
 dharmas, 357
 dharmasāstra, 103
 Dharmasūtras, 103
 Dharmasvarūpa, 205
 Dhody, 373, 408
 Dhruva, 121
 dhūnī, 86, 87, 107
 digvijaya, 291, 418
 digvyāsthāpanam, 140
 dīkṣā, 356
 Dimock, 422
 divine kingship (see, also, sacred kingship), 120, 131, 137, 138, 143, 220, 402, 403

- divine name, 352
 docetic, 378, 381, 382, 386, 388, 389, 392, 404
 Docetism, 20, 378, 382, 383, 386, 388, 390, 416, 430
 Donaldson, 114, 422
 Doniger, 109, 261, 309, 373, 422, 424, 427
 Doubting Thomas, 413
 Drucker, 6, 408
 Dumézil, 184
 Dumont, 134, 138, 275, 422
 Dunuwila, 169, 422
 Durga, 426
 dvaita, 228, 242, 254, 255
 dvaitādvaita, 241
 Dvāpara, 135, 174
 Dvāpara Yuga, 206
 Dvārakā, 141, 219, 390
 Easwaramma, 6, 97, 106, 378, 379, 409
 Easwaran, 323
 Eaton, 282, 284, 285, 288, 422
 Eck, 266, 422
 Edgerton, 345, 408
 Edholm, 342, 422
 egô eimi, 366
 Einstein, 335
 ekam sat, 148
 ekānta, 174
 Eknath, 323
 Eliade, 128, 135, 158, 159, 166, 422
 Ellison, 415
 enumeration, 3, 19, 165, 167, 168, 173, 175, 215, 222, 225, 226, 261
 ethical prophet, 364, 365, 367, 370
 ethicization, 71, 73, 74, 75, 81, 150, 262, 273, 430
 ethos, 285, 292
 exemplary prophet, 365, 367, 368, 370
 Exon, 32, 85, 415
 fakīr, 86, 87, 88
 Fanibunda, 7, 408
 Feldhaus, 237, 238, 240, 276, 408, 427
 Feyerabend, 422
 Fleising, 77, 422
 Flick, 65, 422
 Forsthoefel, 252, 253, 261, 298, 416, 417, 418, 419, 420
 Fort, 416
 Fortescue, 416
 Foucher, 422
 Fritz, 283, 423
 Fuchs, 270, 416
 Fuller, 31, 46, 423
 Ganapathi, 146, 408, 412, 425
 Gangā, 33, 423
 Ganguli, 135, 136, 143, 408
 Ganguly, 408
 Garbhodakaśāyī, 222
 Garg, 33, 423
 Garuḍa, 134
 Gāyatrī, 104, 177
 Gerson, 29, 84, 94, 95, 101, 201, 416
 Gersten, 408
 Ghooi, 319, 408
 Ghurye, 144, 216, 283, 416
 Ginzburg, 26, 27, 423
 Godbole, 406
 Gokak, 14, 84, 168, 196, 316, 338, 408
 Gold, 107, 354, 355, 416, 423
 golden aura, 66, 77
 Goldman, 41, 130, 131, 186, 188, 218, 383, 384, 408, 416
 Gonda, 45, 58, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 145, 149, 152, 153, 158, 160, 163, 164, 165, 170, 176, 179, 202, 205, 207, 219, 220, 221, 266, 338, 356, 384, 398, 423
 Goodrick-Clarke, 334, 423
 gopā, 183
 gopālas, 219
 gopās, 183
 gopīs, 120, 183, 212, 218, 219, 264, 307, 330, 368
 Gorakhnāth, 86, 87, 107, 111, 129, 159
 Gossman, 41, 423
 Gosvamins, 211, 231, 234, 386, 410

- gotra, 97, 99, 100, 101, 103, 104, 105, 107, 109
- Govardhana, 118, 219
- Grabovoi, 358
- Grāmadēvata, 271
- Gravel, 77, 423
- greatmen, 314
- Gṛhyasūtras, 103
- Griffith, 327, 408
- Griffiths, 230, 423
- guṇa, 81, 95, 165, 166, 175, 176, 222, 229, 230, 231, 232, 235, 246, 387
- Gunaji, 351, 408
- Guṇḍam, 240, 276
- Gupta, 136, 168, 408
- Guru Govind, 419
- Gurucharitra, 89, 352
- Gurudev, 51
- Gurupoornima, 50
- Gwilym, 126, 294, 295, 302
- Hacker, 3, 161, 192, 195, 212, 245, 248, 250, 251, 260, 274, 294, 295, 309, 314, 318, 319, 320, 322, 323, 364, 400, 416
- Halbfass, 148, 150, 162, 177, 192, 193, 202, 248, 249, 250, 251, 254, 255, 260, 261, 294, 295, 297, 298, 299, 300, 302, 303, 305, 306, 309, 313, 318, 327, 328, 331, 364, 376, 416, 423
- Haley, 76, 423
- Halligan, 416
- Hallstrom, 416
- Hampi, 286, 288, 289
- Hansen, 423
- Hanumantha Rao, 310, 423
- Haraldsson, 14, 41, 44, 45, 53, 54, 61, 84, 99, 101, 102, 125, 141, 194, 200, 208, 209, 268, 276, 346, 348, 382, 416, 417
- Haranath, 298, 379
- Haravijaya, 427
- Hardy, 376, 424
- Hare Krishnas, 13
- Hari, 122, 190, 213, 221, 248, 291
- Harihara, 286, 288
- Harimedhas, 163
- Harināma, 278
- Harivaṁśa, 135, 181, 182, 190, 210, 213, 214
- Harper, 46, 84, 91, 93, 94, 95, 97, 114, 407, 417
- Hart, 424
- Hawley, 414, 424
- Hayagriva, 184
- Hazra, 215, 424
- Heesterman, 69, 74, 75, 128, 138, 251, 261, 302, 424
- Heifetz, 71, 208, 424
- Hemadpant, 351, 408
- Hiltebeitel, 79, 125, 130, 136, 142, 144, 184, 185, 188, 220, 401, 417, 424
- Hindu Renaissance, 84, 90, 91, 93, 294, 297, 300, 302, 304, 323, 326, 327, 328, 414, 415, 419
- Hindusim, 300, 322
- Hirao, 424
- Hislop, 6, 7, 328, 408
- historicity, 26, 63, 178, 189, 376, 377, 381
- Hixon, 28, 408
- Hobsbawm, 27, 424
- Hocart, 129, 424
- Holdrege, 424
- homologization, 136, 164, 166, 223, 260, 292
- homosexuality, 39, 166, 279
- Howe, 82, 85, 121, 417
- Howell, 341, 417
- Humes, 252, 253, 261, 298, 416, 417, 418, 419, 420
- Hummel, 32, 80, 81, 417
- inclusivism
- coordinating, 249, 252, 253, 258, 259, 260, 307
 - egalitarian, 252, 253
 - hierarchical, 250, 254, 256
 - horizontal, 250, 251, 252, 254
 - subordinating, 248, 250, 252, 255, 260, 261, 292, 303, 304, 309, 329, 343,

- 344, 357, 361, 396, 398
transcendent, 254, 255, 256, 262, 264,
289, 291, 296, 300, 304, 307, 309,
310, 314, 317, 318, 339, 344, 357,
396, 398, 399
Indology, 122, 192, 193, 258, 326, 327,
421, 425
Indra, 67, 109, 111, 112, 113, 129, 130,
131, 137, 138, 140, 145, 147, 149, 152,
156, 158, 167, 180, 182, 187, 188, 199,
202, 217, 258, 282, 398, 403, 408
innovation, 3, 19, 74, 75, 82, 101, 132,
190, 293, 300, 318, 362
interiorization, 19, 150, 157, 159, 167, 173,
175, 243, 260, 262
intertextuality, 72, 308
Isherwood, 296, 307, 324, 345, 385, 408,
410
Islām, 86, 87, 88, 107, 214, 258, 259, 284,
286, 291, 306, 316, 357, 414, 429
iṣṭadevatā, 306
Īśvara, 95, 140, 158, 159, 221, 243, 307,
310, 324
Jackson, 74, 78, 79, 268, 272, 417, 421
jada, 387
Jagadeesan, 259, 408
jagadguru, 140, 297
jagat, 44
jāgrat, 168
Jaini, 417
Jainism, 194, 249, 250, 251, 331, 424, 427
jalodakaśāyī, 222
Jamadagni, 99
Janārdana, 279
janma, 195
japa, 104
Jaras, 389
Jātakas, 128
jāti, 285
Jayanta, 251, 260, 262
Jesus, 31, 32, 39, 47, 51, 63, 76, 82, 98,
104, 123, 133, 193, 215, 218, 239, 251,
253, 257, 259, 260, 261, 297, 307, 308,
314, 327, 329, 330, 332, 333, 336, 339,
343, 354, 357, 358, 366, 373, 378, 379,
381, 388, 391, 392, 395, 400, 402, 407,
408, 410, 414, 415, 418, 424, 426, 430
Jha, 424
jijñāsā, 253
Jīnas, 251, 417
jīva, 345, 385
jivātma, 175, 235
jñāna, 73, 175, 229, 231, 232, 242, 243,
313, 324, 412
jñāna-svarūpam, 73
jñānātmā, 64
jñānendriyas, 169, 170, 171
jñāni, 312
jyoti, 173, 387
Kabīr, 86, 88, 89, 106, 107, 263, 352, 382,
417, 420
Kailāsa, 109, 110, 112, 141
Kaivalya, 7, 412
Kak, 177, 424
Kakade, 87, 408
Kākatīya, 284, 285, 286, 292, 380
kāla, 168, 169
Kalahara, 287
Kālahastī, 71
kalās, 168, 169, 170, 171, 225, 227, 228,
280, 354
Kālī, 109, 418
Kali Yuga, 217, 291, 340, 341
Kalki, 184, 196, 214, 318, 329, 338, 339,
340, 341, 342, 349, 352, 411, 417, 419
kalpa, 177, 206, 220, 225, 340
Kamalapur, 334
kamaṇḍalu, 109
Kamaraju, 7, 14, 408
kāmarūpa, 348
kāmarūpins, 130
kamavasthayitva, 348
Kampan, 187, 188, 427
Kampili, 286
Kamsa, 120
Kāñchīpuram, 291

- Kane, 99, 100, 104, 130, 424
 Kant, 14, 31, 408
 Kanu, 409
 Kapila, 165, 173, 215, 251, 403
 kāraṇa, 240, 380
 Karangia, 6, 44, 409
 Kāraṇodakaśāyī, 222
 Karavīrapura, 182
 karmendriyas, 167, 169, 171
 karta, 93
 Kāśī, 111, 400
 Kasturi, 6, 7, 14, 15, 33, 37, 97, 99, 101, 102, 103, 104, 106, 108, 134, 277, 292, 316, 378, 406, 409, 411, 412
 Kāthopaniṣad, 203
 Kausalya, 316
 kavi, 149
 Kavirāja, 211, 234, 410
 Keay, 382, 417
 Keesing, 77, 424
 Kelber, 366, 424
 Kellogg, 398, 424
 Kena Upaniṣad, 58
 Kent, 78, 85, 417
 Kersten, 257, 424
 Keshab Chandra Sen, 313, 314
 kevala, 283
 kevalādvaita, 242
 Keyes, 43, 417
 Kidwai, 126, 166, 429
 Killingley, 295, 318, 319, 322, 417
 kings, 15, 19, 69, 76, 77, 97, 100, 101, 102, 112, 120, 131, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 142, 143, 144, 145, 147, 152, 156, 179, 182, 187, 190, 208, 209, 216, 229, 266, 282, 283, 284, 286, 288, 291, 292, 293, 308, 310, 346, 373, 403, 421, 427
 Kinsley, 48, 276, 280, 356, 417
 Kirlian, 335
 kīrtan, 269
 kīrti, 231
 Klass, 13, 31, 32, 49, 85, 95, 417
 Knipe, 103
 Kodaikanal, 207
 Kondappa, 37
 Kosambi, 99, 149, 152, 164, 180, 181, 182, 191, 206, 216, 425
 Kripal, 34, 307, 345, 346, 359, 379, 417
 Krishnamani, 6, 58, 409
 Krishnamurti, 297, 328, 330, 331, 332, 335, 336, 341, 408, 409
 Kṛṣṇa, 18, 35, 36, 47, 48, 49, 50, 58, 59, 60, 62, 64, 67, 68, 69, 71, 72, 73, 94, 95, 104, 106, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 135, 141, 144, 145, 147, 148, 156, 157, 159, 162, 163, 164, 182, 183, 184, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 202, 206, 207, 208, 211, 213, 214, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 223, 224, 225, 226, 228, 229, 232, 235, 238, 241, 243, 244, 246, 250, 253, 254, 256, 259, 264, 265, 267, 271, 273, 275, 276, 278, 280, 283, 290, 296, 298, 306, 307, 308, 310, 311, 313, 318, 329, 330, 333, 336, 337, 345, 346, 349, 350, 357, 361, 365, 366, 367, 368, 369, 371, 374, 375, 376, 377, 378, 379, 380, 381, 382, 383, 384, 386, 388, 389, 390, 391, 400, 401, 402, 403, 407, 408, 417, 418, 420
 Kṛṣṇadāsa, 234, 410
 Kṛta Yuga, 135, 143, 174, 205, 206, 341
 Kṛttivāsa Rāmāyaṇa, 410
 kṣatriya, 100, 102, 220, 236
 kṣetra, 214
 Kṣīrodakaśāyī, 222
 Kuchela, 121
 Kulkarni, 315, 316, 409
 Kulke, 425, 428
 Kumarappa, 131, 164, 166, 174, 175, 265, 366, 425
 kuṇḍalinī, 159
 Kundra, 409
 kūrma avatāra, 214, 221, 289, 414
 Kurukṣetra, 154

- Kurus, 154
 laghima, 348
 Laine, 59, 181, 223, 278, 292, 383, 418
 lakṣana, 139, 142
 Lakshminarasimha, 112
 Lakṣmī, 221
 Lakulīśa, 289
 Lariviere, 185
 Larson, 191, 408, 410, 425
 lāsyā, 109
 laya, 44, 169, 231, 233
 Leadbeater, 335
 Lee, 78, 85, 115, 123, 359, 409, 414, 418
 Leela, 7, 10, 200, 201, 407, 409, 410, 412
 Levin, 6, 39, 409
 līlā, 43, 48, 50, 68, 118, 186, 218, 280, 374
 līlāmūrti, 289
 līlās, 218, 238
 līlāvatāra, 219, 227
 Lindtner, 191, 192, 201, 425
 liṅga, 44, 67, 106, 110, 141, 172, 173, 370
 Lingat, 206, 425
 locus classicus, 195, 196, 266, 402
 logoi, 329
 logos, 329
 loka, 64, 119
 Long, 161, 418, 425
 Lorenzen, 418
 Lungina, 334, 335, 409
 Luthra, 409
 Lutyens, 330, 331, 409
 Mādhava, 407
 Madhavananda, 347, 348, 349, 350, 371, 409
 madhu, 130
 Madhva, 211, 228, 242, 386, 425, 427
 maghavat, 145
 magic, 42, 83, 88, 269, 370, 385
 magically, 87, 139, 141, 172, 189, 336
 Mahābhārata, 43, 51, 59, 131, 135, 136, 137, 163, 164, 165, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 187, 189, 190, 191, 196, 207, 210, 213, 214, 220, 264, 276, 290, 307, 309, 368, 383, 388, 403, 408, 412, 415, 416, 417, 418, 421, 422, 425, 429
 Mahadeva Sastry, 386, 409
 mahāgurus, 354, 355
 Mahānirvāṇa Tantra, 226, 259, 413
 Mahānubhāvas, 237, 240
 Mahāprabhuji, 298, 348, 349, 350, 371, 409
 Mahārājā, 133, 139, 140
 Maharashtra, 45, 86, 89, 97, 237, 266, 271, 290, 409, 420
 Maharshi, 237, 253, 298, 345, 348, 416
 Mahāśivarātri, 44
 mahātmas, 312
 mātmyas, 219, 233, 398
 mahāvākyas, 399
 Mahāvīra, 127, 251
 Mahāviṣṇu, 146
 Mahdī, 31, 301
 Maheśamūrti, 289
 Maheshwaranand, 409
 Maheśvāra, 81
 Mahetiḥāsa, 141
 mahima, 118, 348
 mahīpāla, 136
 Mahipati, 89, 406
 Maitreya, 31, 239, 330, 406
 Majumdar, 418
 Makha, 145
 makhavat, 145
 Malik, 8, 67, 153, 216, 220, 308, 418, 425, 427
 Malinar, 70, 140, 141, 291, 380, 418, 419, 421, 429
 Malkovsky, 175, 176, 418
 Mallappa, 244
 mana, 77, 422, 423
 manana, 190
 manas, 165, 167, 175
 manastah, 223
 Mānava Dharma Śāstra, 139, 206, 244
 Manavatva, 175

- maṅgalâcaraṇa, 274
 Manickam, 409
 Manobodha, 266
 manojava, 348
 manthana, 190
 mantra, 236
 manushyathwam, 375
 manuṣya, 64, 236
 manuṣya-saṃniveśatva, 64
 manvantara, 135, 136, 301, 340
 Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, 174, 181
 Marshall, 85, 123, 418
 Mata Betty, 55, 125
 Matchett, 12, 43, 62, 68, 70, 73, 135, 153,
 162, 163, 180, 182, 203, 211, 213, 214,
 219, 220, 221, 235, 267, 279, 321, 374,
 375, 403, 418
 maṭhas, 291
 Mathurā, 376
 Matsubara, 229, 409
 Matsya, 66, 181, 214
 mauna, 353
 Max Müller, 150, 172, 327, 398, 409
 maya, 119, 386
 mâyā, 60, 129, 161, 182, 202, 242, 243,
 374, 375, 384, 385
 mâyāmayena, 383
 mâyāśakti, 53, 384, 385
 mâyātvam, 375
 mâyāvin, 385
 mâyin, 384
 McIntosh, 76, 425
 McKean, 85, 133, 232, 418
 McMartin, 409
 Mearns, 78, 81, 85, 418
 Meher Baba, 61, 93, 290, 298, 347, 351,
 353, 356, 368, 377, 386, 391, 392, 393,
 402, 409, 418, 419
 Menen, 418
 merging of the gods, 147, 148, 149, 188,
 200, 258, 320, 366
 messiahs, 359
 Michell, 283, 423, 425
 millenarism, 342, 422
 Miller, 190, 414, 418
 miracles, 18, 41, 42, 44, 45, 54, 66, 84,
 86, 90, 95, 98, 106, 118, 259, 277, 278,
 287, 346, 351, 353, 370, 371, 396, 417,
 420
 Mirchandani, 6, 409
 Misra, 337, 409, 418
 Mitchiner, 136, 425
 mithyājñāna, 161
 Mitra, 147, 337, 410
 Moffitt, 418
 Mohammed, 82, 251, 253, 307, 339
 mokṣa, 89
 mokṣadatva-svabhāva, 64, 267
 moral of the story more important than
 details, 51, 177, 336, 337, 399
 mosque, 88, 316
 mrinmaya, 387
 mukti, 248
 Mumbai, 86, 106, 117, 315, 407, 409, 410,
 412, 415, 416, 418, 426, 427
 Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, 311, 358
 muni, 128
 Murphet, 249, 308, 328, 410
 mūrtis, 221
 Murty, 243
 Muthialamma, 271
 mystagogue, 370
 mythemes, 66, 67, 145, 279, 309, 341,
 346, 364, 380, 391
 mythos, 34
 Nabhadās, 90
 Nabi, 301
 Nāga, 146
 Nagar, 290, 410, 425
 nāmarūpa, 245
 namaskāra, 159, 274
 namaz, 86
 Nandīsvara, 380
 naradeva, 143
 Narain, 385, 425
 Narasiṃha, 62, 67, 68, 89, 185, 211, 214,

- 221, 282, 283, 343, 403, 410, 419
 Narasimha Murthy, 343, 410
 Narasimhachary, 164, 425
 Narasimhan, 15, 52
 Nārāyaṇa, 67, 117, 122, 141, 153, 163,
 164, 179, 180, 181, 182, 184, 185, 187,
 216, 219, 221, 280, 403
 Narayana Rao, 26, 71, 126, 208, 234, 269,
 283, 292, 293, 330, 376, 379, 381, 424,
 425
 Nārāyanaswāmi Aiyer, 410
 Nārāyaṇīya, 163, 214
 naṭa, 374
 nātha, 140, 159
 Nāthism, 160
 Nāths, 87, 89, 159, 269, 278
 nativism, 321
 Nattiamurti, 289
 nāṭya, 374
 nayaka, 285
 Needleman, 392, 393, 425, 428
 Neo-Hinduism, 3, 20, 148, 150, 193, 202,
 204, 253, 257, 262, 271, 286, 294, 295,
 296, 297, 299, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304,
 306, 309, 318, 319, 320, 321, 323, 325,
 363, 400, 419
 Nesbitt, 38, 418
 neti neti, 239, 240, 256, 274
 Neufeldt, 368, 418
 Nikhilananda, 312, 410
 Nilakanta, 284, 426
 Nilakanta Sastri, 284, 426
 Nimbārka, 73, 211, 227, 241, 242
 nirākāra, 118
 Nirānjan, 7, 410
 nirguṇa, 161
 nirmithena, 383
 Nirodbaran, 392, 410
 Nirvāṇa-śatakam, 237
 nirviśeṣa, 242
 nitya, 63
 nityāvātara, 227
 Northern Circars, 284
 Notovich, 257
 Nyāya, 232, 251
 Okawa, Ryuho, 359
 Olcott, 328
 Olivelle, 192, 244, 426
 oppositional charisma, 278, 313, 372
 Osho, 232, 298, 317, 355, 382, 397, 399,
 420
 Osis, 41, 53, 417
 pada, 130
 pāda, 149
 pade pade, 196
 Padma, 109, 327, 413
 Padmanaban, 7, 34, 35, 36, 37, 72, 98,
 102, 105, 160, 208, 214, 218, 220, 270,
 271, 272, 275, 288, 289, 331, 338, 376,
 379, 410
 padmāsana, 158, 159
 pādnamaskār, 273, 274
 Palmer, 13, 17, 21, 47, 49, 50, 79, 81, 85,
 87, 252, 276, 317, 418
 Palotas, 341, 410
 pañcakṛtya, 169
 pañcaprāṇas, 170, 171
 Pāñcarātra, 132, 163, 164, 173, 174, 175,
 176, 224, 225, 227, 229, 230, 409
 Panchabhutas, 170
 panchikrita, 169
 Pandey, 206, 410, 418
 Paṇḍharpur, 271
 Pandurangashram, 46
 pāpa, 236, 266, 277
 Pappas, 257, 426
 para, 33, 96, 108, 173, 188, 321
 parabrahman, 81, 246, 254
 parabrahma-svarūpiṇam, 73
 parachitta, 348
 paramārtha, 245, 386
 Paramātma, 23, 175, 235
 Parameśvara, 240
 Paraśurāma, 214, 220
 Paratatwa, 235
 Parrinder, 11, 39, 46, 49, 56, 62, 63, 64,

- 65, 66, 68, 69, 72, 76, 129, 130, 147,
148, 149, 150, 154, 164, 179, 182, 183,
184, 188, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198,
199, 201, 202, 203, 212, 213, 215, 216,
217, 218, 219, 221, 223, 241, 242, 243,
244, 248, 251, 257, 258, 262, 264, 265,
267, 276, 278, 279, 280, 289, 301, 312,
313, 328, 343, 344, 345, 364, 365, 366,
368, 370, 371, 372, 373, 375, 376, 378,
379, 381, 383, 384, 385, 386, 388, 389,
390, 404, 418
Parsons, 364, 370, 426
Pārvatī, 108, 109, 110, 290
Pāśupata, 289
Patanjali, 329
Pavitrānanda, 346, 392, 410
Penukonda, 291
perspectivism, 254
Phipps, 31, 410
Pillai, 269, 410
poets, 14, 165, 208, 234, 268, 269, 284,
293, 331, 346, 380
Poornaahuthi, 147
Potana, 190, 427
Potter, 239, 245, 255, 260, 399, 418
prabhāmaṇḍala, 67
Prabhavananda, 385, 410
Prabhupāda, 36, 164, 222, 234, 371, 410
prādurbhāva, 77, 179, 188, 214
Pradyumna, 163, 174, 175
Prahlaḍa, 121
Prajāpati, 151, 152, 153, 156, 158, 170,
180, 182, 258, 401, 403, 423
prakṛti, 165, 166, 168, 174, 202, 244, 245,
273, 386, 387
pralaya, 156, 169, 206, 220, 340, 341
prāṇa, 167, 170
pranayama, 87
Prarthana Samaj, 301
Prasad, 153, 284, 285, 286, 291, 418, 426
Prasāda, 64
Prasava, 223
Prashanthi Nilayam, 16, 17, 44, 46, 87, 91,
106, 120, 134, 147, 196, 207, 208, 214,
218, 223, 235, 272, 381, 406, 407, 408,
409, 410, 411, 412, 413
Prašnopaniṣad, 167, 170, 171
Pratāparudra, 284, 286
pravara, 104
praveśa, 223
prema, 7, 73, 109, 121, 122, 210, 264, 265,
272, 310, 333, 334, 340, 360, 361, 393,
412
Premanand, 414
Premananda, 44
preordained birth, 179
Priddy, 6, 15, 51, 52, 53, 166
Prolaka Nayaka, 284
Pṛthivī, 153, 170, 414
Pṛthu, 143, 144, 158, 216, 403
pūjā, 23, 264, 270
punar-janma, 154
punar-mṛtyu, 154
Puṇḍrakas, 182
puṇya, 236, 266
Puraṁjaya, 137
Purāṇas, 25, 61, 81, 88, 122, 125, 174, 181,
197, 203, 205, 210, 211, 212, 213, 215,
216, 219, 220, 222, 229, 233, 265, 267,
313, 333, 340, 413, 415, 418, 424, 426
Purdom, 347, 353, 354, 368, 369, 377,
378, 386, 392, 393, 418
Puri, 141
pūrṇa, 226, 228
Pūrṇa Kalāmūrti, 225
pūrṇarūpa, 227
pūrṇāvatāra, 116, 227
Purohit Swāmi, 197, 410
purohita, 138
puru-rūpa, 129
puruṣa, 119, 149, 150, 151, 153, 156, 157,
162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 170,
171, 172, 173, 174, 182, 188, 200, 202,
215, 216, 219, 232, 264, 280, 403
puruṣottama, 216
pūrva-jāti, 197

- puṣṭi, 242
 Puttaparthi, 16, 17, 18, 37, 38, 46, 58, 86,
 97, 99, 101, 102, 105, 109, 117, 121,
 133, 270, 271, 281, 292, 327, 378, 408,
 411
 Pye, 426
 Qutb, 291
 Rādhā, 212, 275, 280, 376
 Radhakrishnan, 171, 192, 344, 368, 410
 Radice, 148, 414, 415, 417, 419
 Raghavan, 372, 427
 rājā, 100, 102, 140, 209, 336
 Rājādhirājā, 139
 Rajagopal, 336
 Rājārājā, 139
 Rāju, 11, 98, 101, 102, 160, 270, 271, 277,
 288, 289, 331
 Rājus, 100, 102
 Ralli, 78, 410
 Ram Mohun Roy, 296, 300, 301, 302, 304,
 305, 331
 Rāma, 2, 25, 33, 36, 44, 47, 49, 50, 58,
 62, 69, 73, 104, 114, 118, 119, 122, 123,
 145, 148, 183, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189,
 194, 198, 205, 206, 209, 211, 214, 218,
 222, 223, 224, 226, 229, 231, 247, 248,
 249, 250, 251, 256, 263, 268, 275, 280,
 283, 290, 296, 298, 307, 311, 314, 316,
 346, 350, 352, 361, 367, 368, 371, 372,
 373, 376, 377, 384, 387, 388, 389, 390,
 391, 401, 403, 413, 420, 423
 Rāmacaritamānasa, 187
 Ramakrishna, 3, 61, 186, 253, 260, 278,
 279, 296, 297, 298, 303, 304, 305, 306,
 307, 308, 309, 310, 311, 312, 313, 314,
 319, 322, 324, 330, 341, 345, 346, 347,
 350, 357, 364, 371, 376, 377, 379, 380,
 391, 392, 402, 403, 406, 407, 408, 410,
 411, 413, 418, 421
 Ramalingaswamy, 411
 Ramamurthy, 7, 87, 411
 Ramana Maharshi, 237, 253, 298, 345,
 348, 416
 Rāmānuja, 150, 151, 211, 241, 242, 265,
 366, 386
 Ramanujan, 274, 426
 Ramaswamy, 122, 426
 Rāmāyaṇa, 131, 177, 178, 185, 187, 188,
 189, 191, 205, 210, 214, 218, 229, 248,
 249, 250, 352, 372, 373, 383, 384, 387,
 388, 390, 391, 401, 403, 408, 410, 429
 Rāmdās, 266, 292
 Ramesvaram, 44
 Ramprasad, 311
 Rangachari, 100, 101
 raṅgāvatāraka, 374
 Rasool, 354
 rational-legal authority, 78, 150, 156, 169,
 170, 171, 204, 207, 211, 223, 230, 231,
 234, 239, 249, 267, 272, 273, 317, 320,
 327, 366, 367
 Ratnākara, 102, 427
 Rāṭṭ, 240, 276
 Rāvaṇa, 177, 178, 185, 372, 373
 Ravindran, 411
 Rayalaseema, 281, 282, 292
 Raychaudhuri, 304, 306, 317, 349, 364,
 419
 Rebirthing, 356
 Reddis, 284, 285, 286, 292
 redeath, 144, 154
 resemblance, 3, 12, 19, 36, 82, 148, 152,
 155, 156, 162, 164, 166, 173, 174, 180,
 184, 185, 187, 190, 198, 222, 226, 229,
 231, 260, 262, 279, 317, 339, 353
 Ṛg Veda, 45, 128, 129, 131, 140, 148, 149,
 150, 158, 170, 172, 183, 184, 216, 264,
 280
 Richards, 254, 314, 419
 Riesebrodt, 76, 77, 426
 Rigopoulos, 36, 86, 87, 88, 89, 98, 351,
 352, 353, 419
 Rinehart, 34, 391, 419
 Risley, 100, 426
 Rocher, 62, 207, 208, 426
 Rodrigues, 10, 134, 426

- Roth, 72, 139, 426
 Ṛṣabha, 216, 417
 ṛṣis, 99, 100, 104, 109, 113, 117, 144, 154,
 186, 301, 349, 372
 ṛta, 134, 136, 154, 156
 Rudra, 91, 93, 147, 164, 165, 167, 220,
 284
 Rudras, 165, 167, 199
 Ruhela, 51, 58, 95, 184, 395, 411, 420
 Rukmini, 271
 rūpa, 162, 221, 237
 Saalokya, 267
 Saamba-shiva, 279
 Saaroopya, 267
 Saayujya, 267
 saccidānanda-vigraha, 64
 sacred kingship, 19, 69, 138, 139, 140, 185,
 282, 283
 sacrifice, 93, 112, 128, 131, 132, 136, 138,
 145, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153,
 154, 155, 156, 157, 159, 163, 173, 180,
 182, 204, 215, 264, 321, 362
 Sadananda, 237
 ṣaḍguṇāḥ, 229
 sādha, 115, 235, 347
 sādhanā, 23, 24, 31, 272
 sādhu, 71, 196
 saguna, 265
 Sahasra, 150
 sahasrasīrṣa, 150, 172
 saidevottees_worldnet, 10, 22, 24, 80, 91,
 93, 101, 186, 258, 278, 306, 381, 382,
 406
 Śaivism, 3, 19, 48, 97, 106, 107, 113, 114,
 115, 123, 216, 220, 221, 226, 269, 276,
 279, 287, 289, 290, 310, 380, 421, 422
 sākāra, 118, 265
 Śakra, 180
 sākṣī, 235
 Śākta, 216, 357
 śakti, 95, 175, 220, 225, 243, 290
 Śakti, 35, 46, 47, 59, 64, 84, 107, 108,
 109, 110, 111, 112, 115, 117, 118, 119,
 121, 216, 221, 225, 279, 292, 297, 308,
 351, 356, 419, 420
 śaktipāt, 325, 356
 śaktis, 169, 350
 śaktyāveśāvatāras, 224, 227, 363
 Ṣalāt, 86
 samādhi, 356, 389
 sambhashana, 266
 saṁdhyā, 104
 Samharamurti, 289
 Samipya, 267
 Saṁkarṣaṇa, 163, 164, 174, 175, 214
 Sāṁkhya, 3, 132, 158, 165, 167, 168, 169,
 170, 191, 202, 215, 230, 244, 245, 251,
 403
 saṁnyāsa, 105
 sampada, 175, 231
 samrāt, 142
 saṁsāra, 217, 246
 Sanatan, 309
 sanātana, 7, 208, 309, 310, 363, 406
 Sanatanists, 301
 Sandīpani, 371, 372
 Sandweiss, 411
 Sankalpa, 101
 Śaṅkara, 3, 70, 94, 140, 141, 142, 148,
 156, 161, 167, 172, 176, 198, 199, 201,
 211, 212, 226, 237, 239, 240, 241, 242,
 243, 244, 245, 246, 247, 248, 255, 257,
 272, 274, 287, 291, 297, 311, 314, 329,
 380, 385, 386, 397, 399, 400, 418, 425,
 428
 Śaṅkarācārya, 141, 253, 386, 409, 418
 Sanskrit, 7, 11, 12, 13, 23, 31, 46, 53, 62,
 72, 81, 82, 88, 91, 100, 102, 118, 119,
 128, 129, 131, 140, 142, 153, 155, 159,
 161, 165, 173, 178, 181, 186, 210, 223,
 225, 228, 236, 238, 241, 245, 249, 265,
 266, 284, 330, 331, 385, 387, 411, 412,
 413, 414, 415, 423, 424, 427, 430
 Sanskritization, 163, 331
 saints, 352
 Sarada Devi, 279, 296, 345

- Saraf, 7, 411
 Sarasvati, 89, 113, 425
 Sarayu, 390
 Sarin, 411
 śarīra, 380
 Sarkar, 60, 61, 126, 186, 202, 255, 292,
 294, 306, 310, 312, 314, 322, 341, 419,
 426
 Sarma, 301, 302, 304, 305
 Sarmah, 112, 113, 114, 426
 Sarojini Devi, 71, 271, 282, 286, 287, 289,
 426
 sarvadevamayaṃ, 120
 sarvadevatāvatāram, 120
 sarvadhāivathwa, 120, 306
 sarvadharmā-svarūpiṇe, 306
 sarvajña, 176
 sarvajñatvam, 232
 Sarvepalli, 171
 sarwaroopalanu, 120
 saśārīrah, 390
 śāstras, 72, 131, 138, 139, 177, 206, 234,
 244, 374, 413
 Śāstrī, 411
 saṣṣṭi, 168
 Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa, 134, 152, 154, 155,
 163, 170
 Sathya Sai Baba is, 239
 Sathyabodhakah, 236
 satya, 73, 82, 235, 236, 237, 349
 satyam-sivam-sundaram, 236
 Satyanārāyaṇa, 97, 380
 satyatva, 386
 satyayuga, 350
 Satyopanisad, 7, 408
 Saundarya-Laharī, 411
 saviśeṣādvaita, 241
 Savitri, 147, 336
 Sāyaṇa, 151
 Schimmel, 258, 426
 Schulman, 412
 Scott, 79, 409, 410, 427
 screencaps, 15
 Seetha Devi, 290, 426
 Sells, 238, 239, 256, 426
 Sen, 168, 311, 313, 408
 Senart, 67, 426
 Śeṣa, 163, 164
 Seshama Raju, 160
 seva, 117
 Sewell, 426
 shaanthaswaruupam, 361
 Shakuntala, 15
 Shambala, 329
 Sharma, 82, 104, 122, 123, 161, 228, 242,
 253, 271, 306, 371, 386, 416, 417, 419,
 427
 Sharpe, 292, 309, 419
 Shastri, 91, 408, 413
 Shastry, 112
 Shatchakravarthi, 142
 Shepherd, 87, 88, 290, 350, 354, 366, 419
 Sheridan, 174, 175, 215, 216, 225, 227,
 230, 241, 242, 248, 264, 265, 267, 275,
 427
 Sheth, 62, 64, 73, 123, 129, 131, 138, 212,
 225, 227, 318, 377, 381, 384, 386, 390,
 401, 419
 Shils, 76, 190, 427
 Shirdi Sai Baba, 19, 35, 37, 86, 87, 89, 93,
 95, 96, 97, 98, 106, 107, 108, 109, 117,
 118, 121, 122, 124, 256, 263, 270, 271,
 277, 278, 298, 308, 331, 333, 334, 340,
 343, 345, 350, 351, 352, 353, 402, 408,
 411, 419, 420
 Shiva Balayogi, 341, 345, 410, 412
 Shri Sai Satcharita, 89, 278, 351, 353, 402,
 408
 Shulman, 26, 126, 188, 234, 283, 292,
 293, 376, 425, 427
 siddhas, 40, 278, 329, 420
 siddhis, 232, 337, 347, 348, 349, 351
 Singer, 326, 327, 328, 427
 Singh, 101, 102, 345, 350, 412, 427
 Singhal, 316
 Sisirkumar, 337, 410

- Sītā, 69, 389, 390
 śiva, 164, 165
 Śiva, 44, 46, 47, 71, 81, 93, 94, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 113, 114, 116, 117, 118, 119, 121, 122, 123, 140, 141, 159, 165, 172, 173, 180, 182, 199, 210, 211, 212, 220, 221, 224, 226, 227, 248, 264, 268, 269, 271, 276, 278, 279, 282, 287, 288, 289, 290, 291, 292, 308, 349, 353, 366, 379, 380, 396, 418, 419, 422, 424, 425
 Śivāji, 291, 292, 418
 Sivananda, 91
 Śivarātri, 44, 172
 Skanda, 113, 242, 271, 413, 419
 Smith (Brian, David, & H.Daniel), 3, 51, 76, 77, 80, 84, 96, 114, 120, 136, 140, 146, 147, 148, 149, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 164, 173, 212, 260, 261, 264, 266, 287, 292, 362, 363, 364, 382, 412, 419, 425, 427
 Smṛiti, 45, 85, 103, 419
 smṛti, 93, 245
 Snell, 308, 427, 428
 ṣoḍaśakalaḥ, 170
 Soham, 259
 Sohm, 76, 77, 423
 Söhnen, 181, 412
 Soifer, 62, 63, 64, 67, 68, 69, 128, 129, 130, 136, 137, 145, 147, 151, 152, 153, 154, 174, 181, 195, 199, 206, 211, 215, 220, 258, 403, 419
 solarization, 180
 Somvir, 85, 419
 Sontheimer, 44, 45, 138, 214, 425, 427, 428
 sparśanaṃ, 266, 273
 Spellman, 134, 138, 139, 140, 143, 152, 428
 Spencer, 14, 329, 414, 428
 spiritualization, 73, 75, 175, 198, 243, 262
 Sri Krishna, 159, 160, 190, 235, 269, 276, 290, 380, 428
 Śrīdhara, 225
 Srinivas, 45, 85, 103, 108, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 123, 124, 173, 319, 352, 353, 396, 419
 Śrīnivāsa, 235
 Srinivasa Chari, 150, 151, 175, 232, 340, 428
 Srinivasa Iyengar, 337, 412
 Srinivasan, 104
 Śrīsailam, 141
 śrīvatsa, 36, 139
 Śṛṅgēri, 141, 291
 ṣṛṣṭi, 169, 231, 233
 śruti, 93, 173, 245, 415
 Staal, 103
 Stallings, 420
 Stein, 288, 291, 428
 Stewart, 280, 428
 sthiti, 169, 231, 233
 Stone, 28, 428
 Subba Rao, 196, 411
 Subbamma, 220, 379
 Subrahmaṇya, 271
 Subrahmanyam, 26, 283, 376, 425
 Sudama, 371
 Sudarśana, 211
 śuddhādvaita, 242
 Sudra, 236
 suffering, 144, 213, 248, 266, 354, 355, 368, 384, 392
 Sūfis, 257, 262, 263, 352, 354, 400
 Śuka, 90
 Sukshma, 391
 Sullivan, 6, 428
 Sundararajan, 412
 Sundareshan, 311, 428
 Sundaridevi, 379
 Sunkulamma, 271
 Supermind, 337
 Suprabhātam, 235
 suprahistorical, 306
 surviving traditional Hinduism, 294, 296
 Sūrya, 113, 133, 149, 159

- sūtas, 207, 208
 Sutcliffe, 332, 428
 Suthra, 97, 103, 104, 105, 412
 Suthren Hirst, 161, 176, 198, 245, 246,
 385, 397
 Suthren-Hirst, 428
 sūtras, 43, 103, 104
 svabhāva, 366
 svadharma, 365, 373
 svākāra, 225
 svarūpa, 44, 73, 120, 173, 199, 265, 279,
 306, 366, 383
 svarūpāmśa, 242
 svarūpāvatāras, 73, 227
 svarūpāveśa, 224, 226
 svayaṃbhū, 45
 Svensson, 6, 412
 Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, 150, 157, 164, 202
 Swallow, 33, 44, 79, 85, 97, 99, 100, 101,
 103, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111,
 114, 122, 123, 128, 273, 274, 279, 364,
 369, 393, 396, 420
 Swaminarayan, 46
 Tagare, 60, 70, 114, 171, 205, 217, 220,
 223, 232, 235, 238, 266, 342, 368, 375,
 379, 383, 384, 389, 390, 391, 413
 Tagore, Debendranath, 296, 301, 331
 Tagore, Rabindranath, 331
 Taittirīya-Saṃhitā, 154
 Talageri, 315, 428
 Talbot, 282, 284, 285, 286, 287, 288, 291,
 428
 Talcott, 364, 426
 tamas, 165
 tambūrālike, 398
 Tamilnadu, 44, 283, 357, 425
 tāṇḍava, 109
 tantra, 88, 125, 158, 164, 166, 169, 170,
 172, 190, 216, 217, 225, 226, 259, 307,
 310, 413, 420, 428
 tanu, 164, 238
 tapas, 110, 111, 158
 Tapper, 97, 428
 tat tvam asi, 161, 162, 239
 tathā, 266
 tattva, 162, 268
 tattvas, 165, 166, 167, 168
 Taylor, 85, 115, 116, 167, 418, 420
 tejas, 77, 175, 380, 390
 Telugu, 12, 14, 34, 35, 37, 51, 56, 71, 100,
 115, 120, 121, 159, 188, 190, 196, 234,
 245, 268, 269, 282, 284, 290, 324, 407,
 423, 424, 425, 427, 428
 Thapar, 377, 428
 The Mother, 279, 297, 393, 402, 410, 413
 Theosophical Society, 297, 328, 330, 331,
 332, 334, 336, 356, 402
 Tilak, 315, 413, 429
 tirodhāna, 169
 tīrthaṃkaras, 128
 Tirupati, 235, 289, 291, 425
 Tomales, 323
 traditional authority, 72, 77, 78, 142, 156,
 157, 166, 168, 193, 206, 210, 230, 233,
 249, 273, 287, 309, 327, 354, 355, 371
 traditionalism, 3, 19, 20, 83, 293, 294,
 295, 296, 300, 301, 311, 318, 319, 323,
 325, 363, 400
 Trautmann, 302, 428
 trayī-vidyātman, 119
 Treta Yuga, 121, 135, 174, 206, 308
 trikaladarshitva, 348
 triśūla, 173
 trivikrama, 184, 282
 tulasī, 117
 Tulsidas, 187, 248, 372
 Turabian, 15, 428
 turīya, 260
 turīyavasthā, 168
 twelve characteristics of the Avatars, 62
 Tyagananda, 346, 413
 Tyāgarāja, 79, 268, 417
 Uddhava, 390
 Uma, 290, 406
 upadeśa, 118
 upādhi, 256

- upaniṣad, 155
 Upaniṣads, 58, 90, 93, 125, 132, 153, 155,
 157, 162, 165, 167, 168, 176, 178, 193,
 200, 203, 210, 236, 239, 245, 246, 254,
 258, 264, 301, 302, 399, 403, 410
 Upapurāṇas, 424
 Uravakonda, 271
 Urban, 40, 83, 85, 166, 232, 315, 316, 317,
 321, 355, 397, 399, 419, 420, 427
 Vāgābhṛṇī, 149
 vairāgya, 229, 231
 Vaiṣṇava, 80
 vaiṣṇavam, 390
 Vaiṣṇavism, 3, 19, 47, 48, 106, 114, 115,
 116, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 132,
 159, 164, 207, 216, 217, 218, 220, 221,
 225, 227, 229, 231, 258, 263, 267, 269,
 273, 279, 289, 290, 310, 356, 357, 367,
 368, 377, 381, 386, 401, 409, 412, 416,
 421, 425, 428
 vaiśya, 100, 236
 Vallabha, 211, 242
 Vālmīki, 177, 187, 188, 205, 249, 383, 388,
 390, 391, 401, 403, 408
 Vāmadeva, 149
 Vāmana, 62, 67, 68, 114, 145, 154, 184,
 185, 211, 214, 282, 403, 419
 van Buitenen, 258
 Vanita, 126, 166, 428, 429
 Varāha, 153, 214, 286, 414, 418
 varṇāśramadharma, 240
 Varuṇa, 113, 147, 154, 165, 398
 Vasudeva, 121, 174, 175, 182, 223
 Vāsudeva, 121, 163, 164, 173, 175, 182,
 183, 184, 185, 243, 246, 283, 403
 Vaudeville, 89, 271, 278, 420
 Vāyu, 170, 211, 216, 413
 Vedāngas, 177
 Vedānta, 240, 249, 250, 253, 258, 259,
 295, 306, 311, 313, 322, 385, 408, 416
 Vedarakṣana, 91, 244
 Vedas, 45, 69, 80, 90, 91, 93, 99, 105, 111,
 112, 113, 119, 126, 128, 129, 130, 131,
 132, 134, 136, 140, 142, 143, 144, 145,
 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 154, 155,
 156, 157, 158, 163, 164, 165, 167, 171,
 177, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 188,
 191, 194, 210, 216, 236, 244, 251, 252,
 256, 260, 264, 280, 285, 290, 292, 296,
 302, 303, 304, 307, 313, 315, 322, 340,
 363, 372, 398, 407, 413, 415
 Vedaśākhā, 104
 Velamas, 284, 285, 286, 292
 Veluthat, 282, 429
 Vema Reddi, 286
 Vemana, 268, 269, 407
 Vengamma, 379
 Venkatagiri, 209
 Venkataiah, 271
 Venkatesananda, 249, 413
 Venkateśvara, 427
 Venkatraman, 412, 413
 Venkavadhoota, 97, 104, 117
 Venugopalaswamy, 310
 Verghese, 235, 283, 288, 289, 291, 429
 vibhava, 173, 174, 225
 vibhavākāra, 225
 Vibhu, 43
 vibhūti, 43, 44, 87, 89, 96, 269, 353, 357,
 370
 Vibhūtis, 357
 Vidwathposhana, 91
 vidyā, 7, 407, 408, 412, 418, 427
 Vidyāraṇya, 287, 288
 Vighraha, 64
 Vijayakumari = Vijayamma, 6, 158, 159,
 413
 Vijayamma, 141, 142, 159, 413
 Vijayanagara, 71, 101, 282, 283, 286, 287,
 288, 289, 291, 292, 423, 425, 426, 428,
 429
 Virabrahmaṇ, 269, 270, 330, 349, 379,
 381
 virāt, 152
 Virūpākṣa, 288, 289
 vīrya, 175

- viśeṣa, 228
 viśeṣāvatāra, 227
 Vishṇu, 269
 viśiṣṭādvaita, 241, 255, 259
 Viṣṇu, 36, 43, 44, 47, 48, 62, 67, 73, 77,
 81, 90, 111, 112, 118, 121, 122, 123, 129,
 130, 131, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 139,
 141, 143, 144, 145, 146, 151, 152, 153,
 156, 158, 164, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184,
 185, 187, 190, 195, 203, 210, 213, 214,
 216, 218, 220, 221, 222, 223, 227, 229,
 234, 235, 258, 264, 268, 269, 279, 282,
 287, 291, 307, 321, 349, 374, 382, 386,
 390, 401, 403, 415, 417, 419, 423
 viṣṇu (derived from √vi), 182
 Viṣṇuization, 401
 viṣṇuparamaṁ-padam, 291
 Vissarion, 358
 Viśvanātha, 269
 viśvarūpa, 151, 152, 153, 188, 199, 200,
 201, 219, 220, 366
 Viṭhobā = Vittala, 271
 Vivekananda, 3, 22, 148, 192, 234, 254,
 255, 271, 287, 295, 296, 297, 303, 304,
 306, 307, 308, 309, 310, 311, 314, 315,
 317, 318, 319, 320, 322, 323, 324, 325,
 349, 402, 406, 410, 413, 414, 415, 417,
 419
 von Stietencron, 76, 77, 429
 Vṛndāvana, 64, 106
 Vṛṣṇis, 182
 Vyaktinātha, 343
 Vyāsa, 43, 155, 216, 332, 403, 408, 422
 vyavahāra, 245, 386
 vyūha, 164, 173, 174, 175, 176, 219, 222,
 224, 229, 246
 Walker, 234, 429
 Warapande, 315, 429
 Warren, 352, 420
 Warriar, 301, 355, 420
 Weber, 3, 18, 76, 77, 81, 103, 156, 193,
 210, 261, 273, 354, 364, 370, 421, 425,
 426, 429
 Weberian reversal, 364
 Werblowsky, 138, 139, 429
 Wezler, 193
 Whaling, 62, 64, 85, 205, 263, 318, 384,
 387, 420
 Whitaker, 380, 429
 White, 84, 86, 87, 88, 90, 93, 106, 107,
 218, 305, 325, 350, 420
 Wikipedia, 65
 Williams, 7, 75, 102, 415, 417, 418, 428,
 429
 Williamson, 325, 420
 Wilson, 327, 413
 Wolf, 334, 409, 429
 Wolf Messing, 334, 335, 343, 365, 409
 Wolpert, 315, 429
 Woodroffe, 225, 226, 259, 413
 yadā yadā, 181, 195
 Yādavas, 383
 yajña, 93, 112, 147, 156, 237, 264
 Yajur Veda, 119, 151, 154, 170
 Yakṣas, 236
 Yama, 226
 Yamadhuutha, 226
 yantra, 196, 217, 415
 Yardi, 181, 429
 yaśas, 229
 Yaśodā, 60, 220
 yathātmya, 386
 Yellappa, 244
 yoga, 87, 158, 159, 160, 221, 274, 320,
 408, 422
 yōgabhraṣṭas, 173
 Yogabhuumi, 321
 Yogananda, 298, 345, 347, 348, 355, 413
 Yogavāsiṣṭha, 249, 352
 yogeśa, 159
 yogeśvara, 159
 yogī, 87, 159, 268, 269, 276
 yogīśvara, 159
 yuga, 135, 136, 144, 174, 181, 186, 194,
 195, 196, 205, 206, 280, 308, 320, 321,
 340, 341, 349, 352, 356

Yugāvatāra, 52, 225, 409

202, 203, 204, 258, 273, 413, 429

yuge yuge, 195, 196

Zimmer, 181, 429

Zaehner, 150, 157, 158, 165, 194, 199,

NB This is a substantially shortened version (as required by my external examiners) of the thesis that I originally submitted. This version is certainly more readable, and considerably more coherent, but much material in the category “interesting but inessential” had to be omitted. Interested readers may email me for a copy of the long version: michaelspurr@gmail.com.